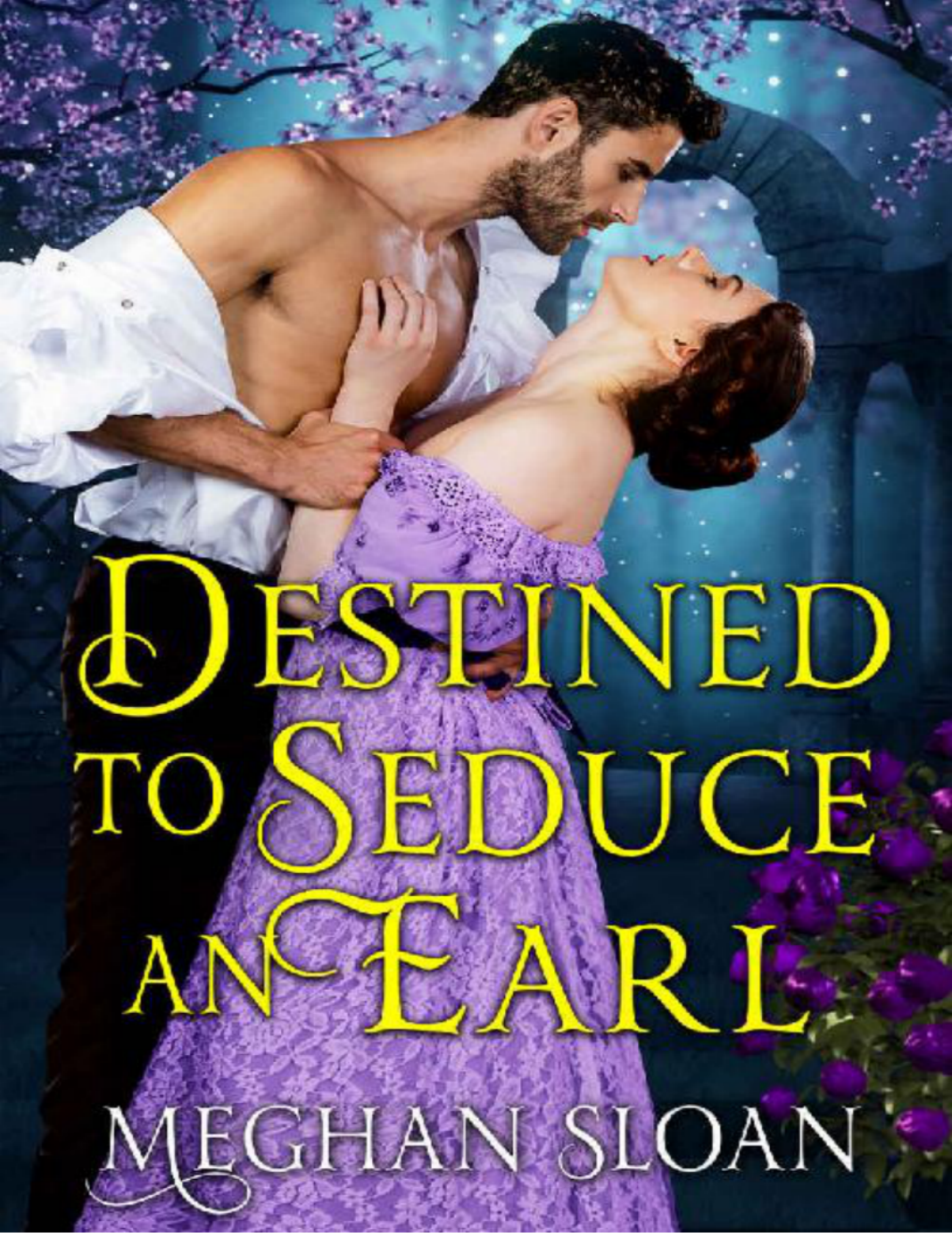

DESTINED
TO SEDUCE
AN EARL
MEGHAN SLOAN

Destined to Seduce an Earl

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

MEGHAN SLOAN

Copyright © 2021 by Meghan Sloan

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Table of Contents

Destined to Seduce an Earl

Table of Contents

- Free Exclusive Gift

Destined to Seduce an Earl

- Introduction
- Chapter 1

Never Doubt a Duke's Desire

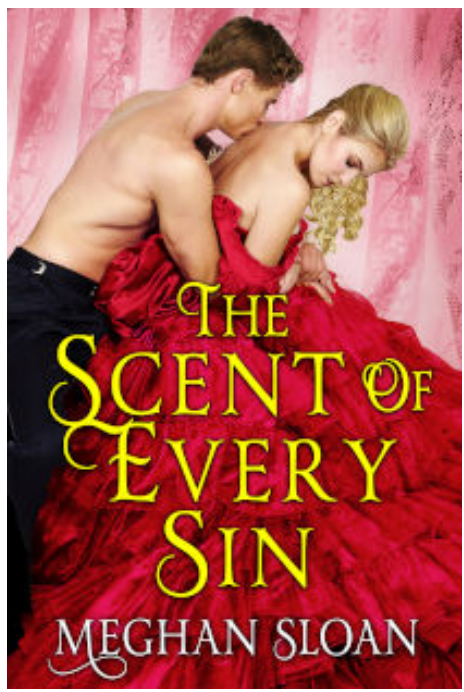
- Introduction
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3

Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel "The Scent of Every Sin" (available only to my subscribers) for FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

https://dl.bookfunnel.com/64lyd083xo



Destined to Seduce an Earl

Introduction

Rosalind Read had several suitors and a promising future. All that changes when tragedy strikes and her family is forced to flee to the border of Wales. There, in an effort to provide for them, she has to trespass every day into the forest to forage for food. What she never expected, though, was to meet there the most seductive man she has ever seen... When an enticing nobleman is thrown from his horse in the forest, Rosalind is there to give him first aid. While helping him recover from his injury, she will feel captivated by his seductive gaze. As Rosalind's desire to the injured Lord grows, will she finally dare to surrender to this fiery love affair?

Being the Earl of Linwood, Henry Orson is despaired of living the life his strict father requires of him: marry the Marquess's daughter, a woman he has no interest in, and produce heirs to the dukedom. When he injures himself and becomes amnesiac, he senses he has no wish to return to his old life. Instead, when he meets the alluring Rosalind, he is shockingly enraptured by her magnetic beauty. Just after his memories return, and he is found in an abandoned cottage, he will find himself trapped in a dilemma; Will he finally choose to risk everything for the only woman that set his heart on fire, or will he go back to the life he left behind?

Without even realising it, Rosalind and Henry will start playing a

wicked game of passion that can neither explain nor resist. However, someone has vowed to tear them apart, threatening to reveal a well buried secret. Torn between desire and logic, will they find a way to overcome the obstacles and prevent a scandal before it is too late? Or will their passionate future remain forever a dream that ended too soon?

Chapter 1

Early September, 1819

Rosalind

Miss Rosalind Read reached up and caught a branch, tugging it low enough for her friend, Miss Eira Weiss, to reach the small, coarse-skinned apples that grew from it.

'Twas a lovely September day, and the birds were still about, singing merrily in the branches of the forest. Next to Eira, an ethereal beauty with near-white hair that was wispy and light, her pale blue eyes and alabaster skin almost spectral, Rosalind was of an earthier sort: chestnut hair, rosy cheeks, dark grey eyes, and impish features. Eira might have been an angel, but if so, then Rosalind was an elf of the wood.

Which, reflected Rosalind, would have cast their teacher, Oma Weiss, as what? A witch, no doubt. Some of the Breacott townsfolk would certainly agree, though Rosalind had no love for them. Oma was fair too good-hearted to deserve their superstitious scorn. The white-haired elderly lady, her face like a brown walnut, wrinkled and leathered with sun and time, stood fifty paces ahead, peering back at them to see why they had stopped. Rosalind smiled at her and gestured to the apples. Oma gave her a nod and moved just beyond sight, searching for more mushrooms.

'You shall have these,' Eira said, indicating the apples.

'Oh no, you must keep them,' Rosalind demurred. 'You shall make some lovely tarts I daresay, and I shall have a piece of one for tea one day soon.'

'Nonsense,' Eira said briskly. 'Of course you well know I delight in baking tarts and the like, and you seek to tempt me thus. But I know your cunning ways, Miss Read.'

‘I, a temptress? How drole,’ Rosalind laughed.

Eira smiled at her. ‘In any case, I insist. You shall have the apples.’

Rosalind’s expression grew more serious. ‘I must thank you, dearest Eira. I do think apples might raise Mama’s spirits a bit.’

‘Just promise me you shall save the lion’s share for her, and for yourself,’ Eira admonished. ‘That Bertie deserves none at all, and I know you shall give him some all the same.’

‘You are so very severe when it comes to poor Bertie, Eira.’

‘Only because you forgive him far too much.’

Rosalinda’s grey eyes darkened, her gaze becoming troubled. ‘I fear you may be in the right, Eira—’

Eira’s pale eyebrows shot up. ‘Rosalind! Can you at last have seen the light?’

‘If by that you would imply that the “light” involves condemnation of Bertie’s many sins, as you see them, then no,’ Rosalind hastened to clarify. ‘I only mean that I am worried. He has been idle—’

‘But for the poaching!’

Rosalind winced. ‘He promised to cease poaching some weeks ago.’

‘And I imagine you believed him,’ Eira said with a nod.

‘Why mightn’t I? Bertie may be many things but a liar?’

‘When it suits him, I daresay.’

‘Oh, Eira, you are too severe.’

‘Perhaps. But you were saying, Rosie? You are worried?’

They began picking their way through the tangle of undergrowth, attempting to rejoin Oma.

‘’Tis only that—he is a young man, and to have no outlets for his intellect—he was well stimulated at university—’

‘Overly so, wouldn’t you say?’

Rosalind blushed. ‘He became misguided, I will allow. But I am the older sibling. ’Tis my lot to see to our well-being,’ she added with a pang of grief she did not share.

Eira shook her head. ‘I cannot agree, Rosalind.’

The brunette ducked under a branch and sought to change the subject, wishing to avoid the painful topic to which they had strayed too closely.

‘In any case, thank you for the apples. Mama shall be pleased,’ she said.

‘Apples,’ said Oma appreciatively as they approached.

‘You must take them,’ Rosalind blurted, guilt flooding her at having accepted them before offering them to Oma.

'Quatsch!' Oma snorted. 'Twas one of the German words she had never given up despite living in England for decades. Rosalind understood it to mean something akin to 'poppycock.' 'They shall do nicely for your Mama, Rosie. And if you tie the cores in some cheesecloth to boil you may set preserves more effectively, ja.'

'Preserves?' Rosalind echoed uncertainly.

'Ja, you must put the little bag of cores in with the fruit—the blackberries from yesterday, ja?—with sugar, and water. Boil it all. The cores have a bitter essence which aids in setting jelly.'

Rosalind nodded and eyed the apples doubtfully, but Oma Weiss was never wrong about such things.

'You've a full basket now, Oma,' Eira observed, and indeed the elderly woman had collected an impressive harvest of mushrooms. 'With the apples, surely we might return home now?'

Oma peered at her adoptive daughter with a shrewd smile. 'Never one to enjoy the forest, eh, mein perle?'

'Oh, Oma, you know I don't,' Eira sighed.

Eira would far prefer to remain at the hearth in the charming little house she shared with Oma on the outskirts of the nearest town, Breacott. She liked to embroider, knit, and engage in all sorts of other practical arts, rather than forage in the woods for herbs and wild fruit. Rosalind regarded her fondly. She herself enjoyed the forest. She loved seeing birds in the branches, and to catch sight of a deer, and hear a gurgling creek, or smell the scent of honeysuckle. There were bluebells and flowering fruit trees in the spring. In summer, wildflowers blossomed far and wide, filling clearings and meadows outside the limits of the trees. In autumn there were fruits everywhere: blackberries, rowan berries, whitebeam, as well as

mushrooms and other wild foods to forage. And the leaves turned, blazing in bright reds, oranges, and yellows. The winter brought the quiet, the stillness of new snow. Few animals stirred, and the whole world seemed to be at peace.

Rosalind had not always lived here in western England, very near Wales—but in the last three years she had come to adore the nature that surrounded her.

'We have not finished our efforts this day,' Oma said, clicking her tongue at Eira in good-natured scolding. 'Come, Rosie, I should like to show you some juniper.'

They stepped with care through the wood until the way became easier: they had found a deer path. Oma stopped in front of a tall shrub covered in needles.

'This is juniper,' Oma said, taking a bristly stem in her gnarled hand. 'You see, the needles go all around, in whorls of three, ja? 'Tis of import, for the yew's needles grow out flat, in two rows.'

She walked a bit further, beckoning Rosalind, who followed. 'This is a yew. You must not mistake it for a juniper. The yew's berries are red, shaped like cups, and they are poisonous.'

'And the juniper's berries?' Rosalind asked studiously.

'Blue, and more hard. They are good for many ailments. They fight fevers, and assist in healing a festering wound.'

'What was that?' Eira asked, turning.

At first, Rosalind heard nothing. Then, as she strained her ears:

‘Dogs!’ she gasped.

Panic made her heart hammer.

Dogs and horses.

‘Oh no,’ Rosalind breathed.

Rosalind, Oma, and Eira were trespassing on the marquess’s land. If they were caught—

‘Come!’ Oma said, crouching and leaving the path. They rushed into the thick of the forest as fast as they could manage with the creeping vines and fallen branches waiting for an unwary step.

The bugling dogs sounded closer.

They must not catch me!

Rosalind grasped a mossy sapling, pulling past. Eira let out a cry. Rosalind turned. Her friend had fallen. She was fifty paces behind.

Moving with haste, Rosalind hurried back for her. She pulled Eira to her feet. Pushing her ahead, Rosalind put out a hand to steady Eira if she slipped again.

Dogs bayed. The horses—there were many—thundered closer.

A hunting party?

It must be.

Oma had found a thicket. She crouched down, pulling the branches around her. *A witch indeed,* Rosalind thought, as the foliage made Oma near invisible.

Rosalind could hear the horses. The trees made it hard to place exactly where they were.

Surely they shan't cross close to us—this area is too dense.

But the fox or deer they hunted might have the same idea as they, and lead the hunters here.

With a whimper Rosalind pushed Eira to the thicket. The slight blonde folded herself, slipping within the protection of the leaves.

Rosalind saw nowhere to hide.

A whinny—far too close—made her whirl around.

A huge, dappled, liver chestnut—near black—galloped through the trees towards her, a white streak of a blaze down his face. Rosalind hid behind a trunk, peering at the man riding the gorgeous horse.

The man looked as wild as the woods, she marveled. His frame was large, befitting the massive horse. He had lost his hat, and his brown hair blew back from his face. Thick, arched eyebrows lowered over eyes a startling amber she could see even from this distance. A strange thrill passed through her even as she cowered behind the tree, praying he would not see her. Yet when he passed, evidently not having done so, she felt a most bewildering pang of regret.

'Who was that man?' she murmured in wonder.

She would find out sooner than she ever expected.

Chapter 2

Lord Henry Orson, Earl of Linwood, was out of temper the following morning, but that was nothing new. He wondered whether Phillips, his valet, ever tired of his choleric moods. *It can't be helped,* he thought unhappily. *Poor Phillips is quite unlikely to find another post, at least until we return to London.*

The thought of doing so sent a wave of dread through the earl's heart and he clicked his tongue in agitation.

'My lord?' Phillips said solicitously as he knotted Henry's cravat.

'Oh, 'tis of no account,' Henry replied. ''Tis only that I wish I might leave, but I despise the thought of returning to London. Is it truly impossible to please me, Phillips?'

'I think not, my lord. You've always liked Linwood.'

That was true. The estate was not his family's primary holding, of course, despite its vast grounds, but he had spent many years there as a child. There he had developed his fondness for all pursuits having to do with fishing, hunting, and riding. He did enjoy returning to visit Linwood whenever he could, which had not been for many years.

'Perhaps I may find some reason to go there, instead of London,' Henry mused.

'I should think that if you were to marry, you might take your new bride on a tour of the family properties, my lord,' Phillips suggested.

Henry made no reply. He was loath to marry, and the prospect of

visiting Linwood was not enough to change that, but he saw no reason to say so to Phillips, who was only trying to cheer him.

'Would that a fellow could simply travel wherever he pleased,' he muttered.

'Well, you are the Earl of Linwood, my lord. I daresay you might visit it whenever you choose,' Phillips said.

'One might assume so, but one would find that my parents do not agree.'

The Duke and Duchess of Kenling had very rigid expectations for Henry. 'Twas the origin of all of his vexations, when one came to it, and he resented them hotly for it, whilst judiciously avoiding ever confronting them about it.

His Grace the Duke had been born a third son and as a result pursued a career in the Royal Navy, rising to the rank of vice admiral before the age of four and twenty due to his success in the war with America. However, both of his elder brothers died within the following decade, so he returned to England, married, and took on the title of Duke and all of its associated responsibilities. He never lost his strong sense of discipline and military outlook, however. When Henry was still in leading strings his father was called again to serve against the Spanish, and he did not return until Henry was eight years old. He left again two years later, so that in consequence he was absent for most of Henry's upbringing.

This was a source of great unpleasantness for Henry, for the Duke viewed Henry as an indolent, undisciplined whelp quite ruined by the life of ease of his childhood.

'There you are, my lord,' Phillips said, stepping back and studying his work. Henry had every confidence the cravat was impeccable.

With a nod of thanks to his valet he made for the pink morning room, a large chamber in the expansive manor, one of two, which their hosts had designated for the first meal of the day. As he neared it, walking resolutely through the grand corridor paved in golden panels of wood arranged in intricate criss-crossing patterns that echoed with the impact of his Hessians' heels, a lady turned a corner ahead of him. One could not mistake the sound of the hitch in Henry's step as the sight of her arrested him. 'Twas Lady Alfreda Howard, eldest daughter of the Marquess of Corrach, lord of this estate, and the woman his parents had decided he was to wed.

Devil it, he thought crossly.

Had Henry a more romantic frame of mind, he might have liked Lady Alfreda very much. She was an incomparable female, with thick, dark blonde hair in luscious curls around her face, large blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and plump, pink lips. Her toilette was always perfect, and her attire tasteful and elegant. She was, in sum, the perfect English rose.

Henry wanted nothing to do with her.

'Twas too late to avoid her now, however. He bowed as she rounded to face him and she curtseyed prettily in return.

'Good morning, Lady Alfreda,' he said dutifully.

'Good morning, Lord Linwood,' she replied, her blue eyes wide and expectant.

As was polite, Henry offered her his arm, and walked with her the rest of the way to the morning room. As they entered his mother looked up from her tea. Instantly he recognized the approval in her gaze. A glance at his father might have given one to believe him indifferent; he was reading a letter and did not stop to acknowledge them. Henry knew, however, that the Duke was as set on this union as the Duchess was.

Lady Alfreda's own parents and several other guests were also present, and everyone greeted each other pleasantly.

Henry clenched his jaw as he sat, then set about toasting a piece of bread for himself in the fire.

'Oh, what a fine idea, my lord,' Lady Alfreda chirped. 'Might I ask you to toast one for me, as well?'

'I would be delighted,' Henry said through his teeth. His mother cut her eyes to him, a subtle warning to watch his tone.

Closing his lips with care, Henry said no more, but set about the task of making toast for Lady Alfreda and planning how soon he might escape for a ride through the grounds. Truly, his situation was unbearable, but he could think of no remedy.

He must endure it.

Lady Alfreda Howard knew herself to be beautiful and charming.

These are attributes for which she had worked hard and made sacrifices. To do away with the few freckles which threatened to mar her creamy complexion, Alfreda covered her face in elderflower water at night and applied an unction oil of lemon juice and bitter almond every morning. She always protected herself from the sun with a bonnet, gloves, and a parasol, no matter the weather and what she might *like* to do. Some young ladies might run and play, losing a bonnet here, pulling off gloves there. But not Alfreda. And as for her comportment, she had been taking lessons since she was in leading strings. Although she had, of course, been blessed with lovely features and silky, thick hair, every aspect of her beauty that she could influence, she did. 'Twas her calling, as a nobleman's daughter, to do so, and she stood in the long shadows of her two older sisters, after all. Beside them, she had, more often than not, felt inadequate. In her childhood, she had loved to read, and they had scorned her as a bluestocking. Eventually under their influence, she had given up books. Her sisters made sure, as frequently as they could, to remind her of even her smallest failings. Alfreda's mother, the Duchess, thought this all to the good: it prompted Alfreda to always attempt to surpass herself in her comportment and accomplishments.

This was why Alfreda found Lord Linwood's attitude to her very hard to understand. Alfreda was perfectly aware that he disliked her, but she could not fathom what prompted his distaste. She wore the finest dresses. Her lady's maid, Joubert, styled her hair most fashionably. Alfreda laughed when one should laugh, and hung on Linwood's every word, and moved with all the grace she had long practiced. She knew herself in every way to be an incomparable female, a perfect match for the earl. He should like her very much, and yet, he did not.

Linwood carefully placed her toasted bread before her and commenced another piece for himself, his eyes fixed on the task, showing no interest at all in gazing at Alfreda's beauty. Two years

ago, she might not have cared, but she was growing desperate. Two Seasons had failed to bring her to matrimony. She could not endure a third. It must be Linwood who married her. There are no alternatives.

'I daresay it shall be another sunny day today, my lord,' Alfreda said to Linwood.

He had hardly grunted when one of the guests, Lady Harriet, put in, 'Oh yes! I say! 'Pon rep, shall we have a skittles tournament?'

Alfreda glanced at her, suppressing a prickle of irritation at the interruption. She leaned closer to Linwood and batted her eyelashes. 'Indeed, what a capital idea, and you shall be my partner, Lord Linwood. What say you?'

He looked at her at last, his golden eyes wide with alarm. 'A tournament?'

'A grand opportunity for you to dangle after Lady Alfreda, my lord,' Lady Harriet smirked. 'Twas all Alfreda could do to prevent herself glaring at the silly peahen. 'Not that any of us could ever blame you. We can't all be a diamond of the first water, *n'est pas*?'

'Oh, piffle, Lady Harriet,' Alfreda protested lightly. 'You flatter me so.'

'Nonsense, I speak nothing but the truth,' Lady Harriet said with glee. 'I daresay Lord Linwood shall delight in trailing about after you like the moon-calf he is.'

Alfreda narrowed her eyes at Lady Harriet. Was it possible the widgeon was cleverer than she seemed? She could not possibly be in earnest with this teasing. And yet, the lady's face was guileless. She simply *was* that dimwitted.

With a smile, Alfreda changed the subject, asking another guest about

their relations. In the corner of her eyes, she saw the tension in Lord Linwood's shoulders.

He shall flee at the first opportunity, I predict. If the other lords wish to take a ride, I shan't see him the rest of the day.

Unconsciously, Alfreda tore her toast to little bits, uneaten. She was at a loss.

She *must* marry Lord Linwood, the sooner the better. But how might she succeed in convincing the fellow himself of this imperative?

The answer eluded her, and she must remedy that as quickly as possible.

There was no other way forward but this. Her future depended upon it.

‘Eira, what a pleasant surprise,’ Rosalind said. She stood outside the chicken coop, holding a basket. Her light-haired friend had walked up just as Rosalind was about to collect the day’s eggs.

‘Lovely day,’ Eira remarked, joining Rosalind to help lift the panel sheltering the hens’ nests. Rosalind nodded and began gathering the eggs.

The chicken coop was one of three buildings on the small property. The other two were the goat’s little cabin, which abutted the coop, and the main house. This latter was very small, with three bedchambers, a parlour, a kitchen, and a necessary. The house was built of irregular grey stone.

The Read family had six hens, after losing several to a fox that summer. Rosalind frowned at three nests: empty.

‘I think some of them have stopped laying,’ she said dismally. ‘I should hate for them to end as dinners.’

‘Have they laid since the fox?’ Eira asked.

‘No,’ Rosalind said. ‘At least, I think not. Tisn’t always evident who lays where.’

‘Oma says that when hens take a fright, they sometimes stop laying for a time.’

‘And do they then begin again?’ Rosalind asked hopefully.

‘I reckon so,’ Eira said. ‘We haven’t had any trouble with ours, I’ll

own. So I cannot speak from experience, more's the pity.'

Rosalind contemplated the four eggs in the basket. 'Twasn't enough. They depended on the chickens to keep their bellies full, as well as milk from the goat. A roast chicken would be quite a departure—Rosalind's mouth watered to think of it—but 'twould make for only one meal. Perhaps two, if she was careful. If there was a chance the hens might lay again, she mustn't risk losing them. When would she have the money to buy more? And that would require going to market in the village. Rosalind preferred to remain hidden away in the Reads' forest cottage.

'Still, four eggs. And that isn't every morning, either,' Rosalind fretted. She had her mother and brother to feed, in addition to herself. Without any other source of meat, hunger would soon find them.

Eira gazed at her with a look of sympathy.

'If only I might begin my work as Oma's apprentice right away,' Rosalind said. 'I might bring home a bit of income, and we could buy some chickens then.'

'Oh, Rosie, you told me just last week that you dread becoming a midwife.'

'I dread starvation even more.'

'Why not return to London?' Eira asked. Her tone was bold and the question startling.

'Whatever can you mean?'

'You said you have an aunt. You might write to her. You could return,' Eira said. 'You would certainly meet suitors. You would marry and have a good life, Rosie.'

‘Impossible!’ Rosalind sputtered.

‘Why is it impossible?’ Eira demanded stubbornly.

‘If the authorities learned of Bertie’s whereabouts—’

‘Why on earth would that happen? Would *you* tell them?’

‘No,’ Rosalind conceded. ‘But if I turned up, surely they would want to know where I had been. They would hope to find him through me.’

‘Nonsense,’ Eira said. ‘Tell them some fudge or other. He bought passage to India or America. They’ve no reason to doubt you.’

Rosalind blinked at her friend in bewilderment. ‘But I cannot possibly think of leaving. What would become of my mother?’

‘Perhaps that is for Bertie to sort out.’

‘What an idea! Bertie! They would both starve within a month!’

Eira frowned at Rosalind. ‘Have you ever questioned why it is that *you* must be the one to tend to everything? Bertie is twenty. He is a man. Shouldn’t he provide for the well-being of his family?’

‘Bertie hasn’t any sense,’ Rosalind said in a low whisper, glancing over her shoulder towards the cottage. ‘And even if he did, he’s a fugitive. I can go into Breacott if I must, but Bertie cannot.’

Eira let out a frustrated sigh. ‘You are two-and-twenty, Rosalind. You have your life ahead of you. Surely you desire a husband? Children?’

A dreadful pang of grief rang through Rosalind's breast. 'You know that I do.'

'And yet you resign yourself to a life of midwifery, despite how little the profession appeals to you,' Eira said.

'I haven't any choice. I only wish to make us all secure. To prevent scarcity and want.'

'But why must it be *your* responsibility, Rosie?'

Rosalind did not answer. She could not speak of the reason, though she knew it in her heart. Eira meant well, but she did not know the whole story. She did not know the truth of what Rosalind had done.

'Twas Rosalind's secret, and she would not share, even with Eira.

This life was her lot, and she would make the best of it, whether it made her happy or not.

Chapter 3

‘Oh, heavens, Lord Linwood, you cannot possibly wish to take another ride today!’

Lady Alfreda was smiling at him sweetly as they sat in the parlour after breakfast the following morning with a number of the guests of the marquess.

‘Take it as a compliment, Lady Alfreda!’ said one of them, Lord Wyndham, who was an elderly man prone to dozing off at all hours of the day.

Lady Alfreda turned her pretty smile on him, Henry noticed, and despite there being no change in her expression, he had the unsettling feeling that she was not so much smiling as baring her teeth.

‘A compliment, my lord?’ she said, her voice like honey.

‘Oh yes, quite!’ Lord Windham said. ‘Your father’s estate is a delight for horsemen. Well maintained, vast, and varied. Were I ten years younger, you should find coaxing me from the back of my horse well nigh impossible, I daresay!’

Henry felt a sense of gratitude that the older gentlemen had taken his part, but everything about sitting in this parlour felt excruciating. He wished he might slip away at once.

What shall I do, when I am miserable every moment of every day, but there is no alternative?

‘Oh, ‘pon rep, Lord Wyndham,’ Lady Harriet put in. ‘But if you were

ten years younger I daresay you might rival Lord Linwood as a dashing suitor for Lady Alfreda!'

At this, Lady Harriet and her sister, Lady Clara, dissolved into peals of giggles.

Lord Wyndham, unruffled by their mirth, replied, 'Perhaps, dear ladies, although I should think Lady Wyndham might have an objection to it.'

To which Lady Wyndham answered, 'One might find it difficult to court lovely young ladies if one is always on horseback.'

And saying this, Lady Wyndham cut her eyes to Henry.

He felt his ears grow hot, and a glance at his mother told him the Duchess had followed the exchange and Lady Wyndham's subtle criticism.

Mother may wish for me to propose to Lady Alfreda, but I shan't.

I refuse to participate in the paving of a road that shall lead me inexorably to a future of torment at the hands of silly peers with nothing better to do than sit about and chat of empty things!

And yet, how else can my future unfold?

Henry could not help but frown, and he fixed his eyes upon a painting above the mantel of hunters riding alongside a pack of dogs.

'Merciful heavens, Lord Linwood, have you a complaint regarding the artwork?' Lady Alfreda laughed.

With a tight smile he looked at her. ‘Indeed not, my lady. I was only contemplating how I should prefer to go hunting, rather than simply riding out today.’

‘What a capital idea!’ said the marquess, who had been reading letters quietly at the writing desk. ‘We mustn’t waste such weather, after all. Hunting is just the thing.’

Henry caught a flash of fury in Lady Alfreda’s eyes, but it was gone as soon as he saw it, and he wondered if he had imagined it. Nevertheless, he was relieved. At least for today, he might avoid this parlour for a few hours.

‘Tis no solution to my cares, but ‘twill have to do for now.

Nevertheless, Henry was agitated as the time came to mount up. The other young lords were laughing and light-hearted, and he felt he was a storm cloud out of place in a blue sky. Lord Corrach called to his dogs and the five noblemen were off.

‘I say, Linwood, I envy you that,’ said Lord Frye, the eldest son of Lord Wyndham.

Henry frowned at him, uncomprehending.

Lord Frye gestured back at the manor, and Henry caught sight of Lady Alfreda standing at one of the large windows on the first floor.

‘By the Devil, Frye, I wish you’d take her,’ Henry exclaimed in exasperation.

‘Damnation, Linwood, you cannot mean it,’ Frye scoffed. ‘A lady like her—such a tempting armful—’

‘She is undoubtedly very pleasant—’ Henry began.

‘*Pleasant!* My dear Linwood, she is a goddess!’

‘Then by all means, Frye, ask for her hand!’

‘As if I ever could,’ said Frye. ‘Have you never heard the stories? Lady Alfreda shan’t have a viscount. You should know yourself very fortunate that she fancies you!’

Henry grit his teeth wordlessly.

‘Always glumping about like a damned Friday-faced tulip,’ Frye said. ‘And whatever for? You’ll be Duke someday, with Lady Alfreda on your arm if you only wish it.’

A wave of unhappiness washed over Henry, and his horse, Thunder, began to dance under him. The stallion was sensitive to Henry’s moods.

‘You’d best settle that animal, Linwood,’ said Lord Corrach. ‘We’ll have trouble enough if they scare up a fox, without an unmanageable mount in the mix!’

‘Of course, my lord,’ Henry managed, but he was unlikely to shake the dark mood, which meant Thunder was unlikely to calm easily.

I wish I might disappear, he thought simply. *I would miss none of this.*

But it seemed a cruel impossibility.

Rosalind

That morning Rosalind was dismayed to find only three eggs in the coop. She brought them inside and set them in the kitchen near the large glazed jug of goat's milk she had collected from Snowdrop, the nanny-goat they had purchased when they first moved to the cottage. Snowdrop was a steady producer, Rosalind reminded herself. They wouldn't go hungry so long as that remained true.

Rosalind built up the fire and warmed an iron pan, then mixed the eggs and some of the milk with flour she'd traded eggs for the last time she risked a trip to the market. She added a little of the honey Oma had given her from the hives she tended, and stirred vigorously. Pouring a dollop in the pan, she began making cakes for the family's breakfast.

Cooking was not something she had been raised to do, of course. Everything she knew, Oma had taught her. She was very fortunate, Rosalind knew, that she had encountered Oma when she had. Without her, how would the Reads be living now?

The fire was hot and soon the kitchen became stuffy and a bit smokey. Rosalind wiped her brow and washed her hands before serving the food on the little wooden table that dominated the small parlour, the largest room in the cottage.

A knock came at the door and Rosalind answered it; 'twas the boy who brought the mail, with a letter for Bertie. Rosalind took it and the boy ran off, knowing well, by now, that there would be no coin for his trouble. Rosalind gazed fretfully at the folded missive. It troubled her that some of Bertie's friends knew where to write to reach him, and that they persisted in doing so, under the circumstances.

Rosalind returned to the table, readying the teapot.

Drawn by the smell of cakes, Bertie emerged first. Rosalind fetched the kettle from where it hung over the fire, wrapping the handle in a rag to avoid a burn, and poured it into the teapot as he sat, scratching his head, and helped himself to three cakes.

'Leave some for Mama,' Rosalind admonished him.

'And a good morning to you, too, Miss Read,' he grouched, ignoring her and cutting into the cakes with appetite.

Rosalind put two cakes on Mama's plate, leaving one for herself, and went to rouse the lady.

Mrs. Read lay in her bed, a small, wooden-framed thing that sagged dreadfully. She had thrown an arm over her face and was quietly moaning. Rosalind frowned and sat on the edge of the bed, taking her mother's hand gently in hers.

'Dear Mama, are you unwell?' she asked.

'How can you ask me such a thing! You know that I am ill! I need the apothecary, I tell you,' Mrs. Read declaimed. Mrs. Read's physical health was not declining as she believed, but Rosalind was far more concerned about her lapses in memory and periods of confusion, which were becoming more common by the day.

'The apothecary?' Rosalind murmured, considering her mother's gaze and deciding it looked lucid today. 'I'm afraid he has traveled to the north, Mama.'

'Twas a fudge she told, but the apothecary would not visit out of charity and Mrs. Read's 'illnesses' were more common than any periods of health. The physical complaints he might try to treat with tonics Rosalind had little faith in, and he was no good with the real troubles.

Rosalind patted the hand she held.

‘Come have some breakfast, Mama,’ she said. ‘I rather think you might gain some strength from eating.’

Mrs. Read let out another moan.

‘And a warm cup of tea shall do you wonders,’ Rosalind persisted.

Soon enough she had cajoled her mother out of the bed and to the table, where, despite her poor health, the lady finished both cakes.

‘Dash it all!’ Bertie exploded.

Rosalind whirled around from where she stood, holding plates she had been taking to clean. Bertie held the letter open in his hands. Glowering, he chewed a thumbnail.

‘Bad news?’ Mrs. Read inquired.

Rosalind cast him a warning look, but he did not perceive it.

‘I say!’ gasped Bertie. ‘There’s been a massacre!’

‘Oh!’ Mrs. Read cried, falling back in her wooden chair.

‘Mama,’ murmured Rosalind, casting a scowl at Bertie, who paid her no mind. She hurried to her mother’s side, taking the lady’s hand.

‘An assembly in Manchester…’ muttered Bertie. ‘A cavalry charge!

Those butchers! Hundreds injured and a dozen killed.'

Mrs. Read's eyes fluttered shut and Rosalind patted her hand helplessly.

'Pray, Bertie, do say no more about it!'

'And I suppose a good swoon is worth the lives of a dozen innocents who only wanted to hear Orator Hunt!'

'Bertie, distressing Mama shan't do a bit of good for those poor people,' Rosalind snapped.

He stood, throwing aside the letter and running both hands into his hair in agitation. 'That's just the problem!' he exclaimed after a moment. 'I wish only to aid them—to fight alongside them—'

'Bertie, you know you cannot!' Rosalind said.

'Confound it, Rosie!'

With that he stormed out of the house.

Rosalind sighed and assisted her mother in returning to her bed. Today would be spoilt for Mrs. Read, Rosalind knew, but there was nothing for it. Once the lady was discomposed, there was no cheering her.

'There now, Mama,' she said, stroking the grey hair from Mama's forehead. 'You have a nice sleep, and I shall return soon enough.'

'Return? But where will you go?'

‘I must seek to find more food in the forest, Mama, if we are to have a good dinner,’ Rosalind told her. That Oma had tasked her with finding certain herbs as part of her education, she did not relay. Mrs. Read was unaware of Rosalind’s ambition to become a midwife, and would have strenuously objected to the idea had she been apprised of it. Rosalind was a gentleman’s daughter, and such a profession was not seemly for her. Mrs. Read, despite their circumstances, would not let go of such niceties.

It fell to Rosalind to be sensible, and she readied her basket for the trip into the woods. In it she placed a knife for cutting mushrooms, a piece of hard cheese she had made some time ago from the goat’s milk to eat later, and a pair of sturdy gloves, which she would only wear if she found blackberries. Resolutely tying on her bonnet, she set out, soon reaching the wall she must climb over to enter the forest proper; this was the marquess’s land, and she trespassed, but there was nothing to be done about it if she hoped to find what she sought.

’Twas a lovely day, smelling of the beginning of autumn, but still light enough for summer, with a clear blue sky peaking between the canopy of branches overhead. In the distance she could hear the nearest brook, which babbled and gurgled as it ran its course through the wood. The forest was green and mossy, with gnarled, twisting branches here and there. They gave Rosalind a sense of magic she particularly liked. This was a forest from old fairy tales, if ever there was one.

As she walked she peered above to catch sight of birds as they flitted from one branch to another. Red squirrels raced up trunks and through the leaves as she passed, chittering at her in curiosity and consternation. A dusky-brown rabbit bolted across her path, disappearing into the thick brambles to her left.

’Twas as she gazed after the rabbit that she saw the snare rigged to a low branch on a juniper. Rosalind clicked her tongue in dismay and approached it, using the knife to cut it down.

‘Bertie,’ she breathed. ‘You promised.’

But if she was honest with herself, she had never really believed his assurances that he would stop poaching. In his own way, he was attempting to contribute to the family larder. But 'twas not worth the risk. If the Marques of Corrach learned that a poacher was in his woods, he would surely take measures to catch him, and poachers met with severe enough punishments, without also being fugitives from the law to begin with. Rosalind already disliked having to trespass every day in order to find berries and mushrooms and the like in the forest. She wished Bertie would not insist on making matters even more dangerous.

Keeping an eye out for more of Bertie's traps, Rosalind found and destroyed two more before she came to the abandoned gamekeeper's cottage where she was in the habit of stopping to eat when she went out on such missions. 'Twas an ancient stone ruin, with two walls falling down, the roof almost entirely caved in. But the remaining two walls and bit of roof that resisted the destructive influence of time provided shelter on days when it rained or the wind was very cold. Additionally, Rosalind had made friends here.

She sat in her favorite spot, a low portion of wall easily accessible. It took little time for the family of feral cats who lived here to appear, watching her expectantly as she unwrapped the goat cheese.

'Lovely day, isn't it, Hera?' she said to the mother-cat, who narrowed her eyes but did not move. Her coat of tan and brown stripes blended most effectively with the patterns of the forest. 'Oh my, Aristotle, how you've grown,' she said to the large male who stepped hesitantly closer. All of the young ones looked like their mother, but she knew them so well she could tell them apart without effort.

Crumbling the cheese, she ate a large chunk, but then tossed bits to each cat.

'Socrates, that isn't nice,' she admonished one of the boys when he stole the bit she had thrown to his sister, Hippolyta. She offered another piece to the female, holding out her hand and keeping very

still. Ordinarily she never required them to eat from her hand, but if Socrates was going to be a thief, measures must be taken.

Hippolyta tip-toed closer, sniffing and glancing warily at Rosalind, who kept her hand steady and made no sound or movement. After a few minutes the feline darted forward and snatched the cheese, retreating with an arched tail of flustered annoyance. Rosalind smiled, pleased that Hippolyta would have her luncheon after all.

The days were already growing shorter, and she could not afford to linger. She still had much to do—another batch of the blackberries in a clearing to the south would be ripe, she hoped, and there were Oma's herbs to find and collect.

Yellow-flowered sticklewort, violet-blossomed knitbone, and blunt-leaved bog-moss, Rosalind recited to herself as she walked, stepping over fallen trees and taking care not to catch her skirts in the brambles as she went. *Sticklewort to stop bleeding, knitbone for healing, bog-moss for both.*

Much as she balked at the idea of a future as a midwife, Rosalind enjoyed learning as much as she could about plants and the forest. Knowing the medicinal uses of plants gave her a sense of confidence she had never experienced in her life before they had come here. 'Twas only that birthing so often ended tragically. She could not bear to imagine failing to bring mother and babe through a lying-in safely, but Oma said 'twas inevitable to lose patients at times.

Tears pricked Rosalind's eyes at the thought of it, and she remembered Oma's words, the last time they had spoken of it.

'Ja, 'tis most dreadful to see a mother die, or the wee one, or both. *Natürlich!* But without your skill, many more will be lost, ja? You serve and fight for their lives, and often you will win, Rosalind.'

Rosalind tried to comfort herself with this admonishment, but she could not convince herself of it. She felt wholly unfit for such a

calling.

Had things gone differently, almost four years before, she never would have dreamed of such a life. Rosalind had just concluded her first London Season, and she had several suitors who promised to court her through the winter. She was delighted; she liked them each for their own qualities, although she did not know any of them well enough to think of choosing one yet. She knew nothing still of love. Nevertheless, everyone expected that by spring she would be betrothed. She might have married Richard Elliott, the first son in a wealthy gentleman's household, known for his five thousand pounds a year and very fine estate. Another possibility was Oliver Norris, whose situation was not as prestigious, but who was very kind and soft-spoken and intended to take orders and become a minister. And there had also been Ernest Wheeler, whose father had been knighted, and who spoke with such passion about birds that Rosalind found his enthusiasm contagious and delighted in walking with him and seeking to catch sight of some.

But then all at once, everything went horribly wrong. Her father was killed and they had to flee, taking what silver they could with them. It had purchased the cottage and the goat and chickens, as well as their furnishings and wood for the winter.

Yellow spots in a small sunlit clearing caught her eye ahead, and Rosalind hurried her pace a bit. Sure enough, 'twas sticklewort, and she cut the sticky-haired stems briskly with her knife.

'Twasn't any good thinking of what might have been, she told herself as she gathered the flowering plants. That life was over and might as well never have been. She lived here in Corrach March now, on the border to Wales, in this forest, and she would become a midwife just as Oma had been.

'Twas, after all, how Oma came to adopt Eira. When a young, penniless Welsh girl died in childbirth, and no one came to claim the babe, Oma named her after her mother, took her home, and raised her as her own daughter.

Perhaps I too shall have a child that way, Rosalind thought sadly. *Although I cannot bear the thought of such tragedy.*

She would rather hope against hope never to lose a patient, even if it meant she might never have a child of her own. Instead, she would see to the well-being of her mother and Bertie for the foreseeable future. And she should be grateful that Oma Weiss took an interest in helping her when the Reads moved here four years before, instead of whinging about the loss of suitors and the rest of it.

A sound came to Rosalind's ears that made her freeze. Dogs and horses again! The marquess must have visitors, to be hunting with a party so often.

Dash it all, Rosalind thought, casting about for a spot to hide. She could not be sure they would come close enough to spy her, but the consequences were too devastating to take the risk.

Making haste, Rosalind made her way through the brambles, paying no mind when their thorns caught her skirt. A tear she could mend; arrest would be a disaster—not just to her, but to Bertie. She ducked under a low, moss-covered branch, seeking some thick bushes to hide in.

She heard shouting and the report of a rifle. Stifling a cry of fear—so *close!* they were so *close*—Rosalind hurried to crouch under a tangle of branches and brambles.

Barking dogs burst into the small clearing. She could not see what they pursued. Two of them came and sniffed at her, but they rushed on immediately, still bugling in agitation.

Several human shouts echoed through the forest, unintelligible, but the tone of the voice sounded distressed. Rosalind risked raising her head a bit to try to make out what was happening, but the situation was far beyond her range of vision.

The yapping of the dogs was moving farther, but now she heard the thunder of hooves approaching. The hunting party? No—this was but one horse by the sound of it.

Hiding in the branches, Rosalind strained her eyes. A branch cracked as the steed crashed through the forest. He was wild—bolting. 'Twas a huge animal, a near-black horse, and she recognized him by his white blaze. She gasped and raised her face to see the rider.

The horse startled at her movement, neighing and shying away. Wheeling and rearing, he threw the man off.

Rosalind cried out. The rider fell hard, hitting a branch on his way to the ground.

Then, he lay still.

The horse galloped away.

Chapter 4

‘Oh no,’ Rosalind breathed as she peered out of the brambles at the man lying prone on the forest floor before her.

The sound of dogs baying continued to fade as the pack ran farther away, delving deeper into the marquess’s woods.

Rosalind’s heart pounded hard in her chest. Instinct pulled her to leave her hiding place and see if the man was badly injured, but another hunter might appear at any moment. If she was discovered, she would likely be arrested for trespassing. That would lead the authorities to find Bertie, and she could not allow that to happen.

She listened hard, closing her eyes, but no sound of hoofbeats came to her ears. Surely if someone was near she would hear them.

They’ve followed the dogs, I daresay.

This man’s horse had gone wild, I’m certain of it. He must have lost control of the animal.

But even if that’s true, the dogs came through here. Why didn’t the other hunters follow?

Rosalind opened her eyes, peering out at the injured man. Red blood spread over the side of his head now.

‘Dash it all,’ Rosalind whispered, and extricated herself from the brambles, the thorns catching her dress and the skin of her hands and face.

As she knelt by the man’s side, she examined him with an efficiency

developed under Oma's tutelage. He was face-down; as such, she did not see any reason to try to move him just yet. The fellow's body seemed impossibly large to her eyes, for none of those in her circle were so very big. She felt the pulse at his wrist and then his throat, taking care not to jostle him or jar his leonine head. His pulse was strong, much to her relief. He breathed without difficulty, as well. With careful fingers she checked for injury to his neck and back, and as best as she could ascertain, found none.

Taking a deep breath, Rosalind grasped hold of the fellow's shoulder and endeavored to roll him onto his side. Oma had explained that one must take measures to ensure that a person who had been rendered insensible would retain the ability to breathe, and that on one's side, this posed the least difficulty. He was quite heavy, and she had to apply a good deal of effort to move him safely.

The adjustment in his position gave Rosalind the first real look at his face. His eyes were closed, of course, so she had no view of their startling amber colour, but she allowed herself a moment simply to admire the strong lines of his forehead, cheekbones, and jaw. He was a powerful man, with broad shoulders and bold features.

His only visible injury was the blow to his head. The branch he had hit cut the skin over his temple, making a gash from within his hair down throw his left eyebrow. His eyebrows arched almost devilishly above his closed eyes, slanting low to the bridge of his nose. His well-shaped lips looked very soft, and Rosalind caught herself staring at them for too long.

'Really, Rosie, you must decide what is to be done,' she admonished herself.

She checked his pulse again, this time experiencing a strange thrill as she touched the bare skin of his neck. The pulse remained strong. His breathing remained steady.

'Tis only right and decent to run and find someone on the estate and alert them to this gentleman's injury, Rosalind thought. *I should do so at once,*

with no regard for the consequences.

However, 'twas not the consequences to herself that she truly feared, although if the marquess was very unforgiving, those might be dire enough. 'Twas the risk to Bertie.

'If you would but waken, my lord,' she murmured to the man, taking his large hand in hers and patting it insistently. 'Pray, my lord, open your eyes.'

His hand felt far too cool in her own, and Rosalind's anxiety increased. Could it be nervous exhaustion? Oma had warned of the dangers of nervous exhaustion. Could an insensible man experience it? She did not know.

'What did Oma say that I must do to prevent it?' she breathed, her heart accelerating as panic built. Her mind was blank. 'Oh, dash it, what must I do?'

If only he would wake. If he regained his senses, I should have to run and hide, but at least I might be reassured that he was not very badly injured.

But the gentleman did not wake. He remained lying just as she had arranged him, the blood continuing to ooze from the wound that cut from his forehead into his scalp, staining his hair.

'Whatever shall I do?' she murmured, quite frozen in indecision.

Henry

This was a strange place.

He felt cold and his eyes were blurred. Was it fog that surrounded him? Yet in some spots his vision cleared. The garden. He was in the garden near the marble statue of Edward IV, the Marquess of Corrach's most prestigious ancestor.

Lady Alfreda appeared from behind it, her skirts swirling as she hurried to his side. 'Lord Linwood, there you are!' she exclaimed, clutching his sleeve.

'Yes, my lady,' he responded, but he felt very out of sorts.

'I have been searching everywhere for you, where did you go?' she demanded in a most uncharacteristic, shrewish tone. Her grip on his sleeve tightened, the fabric pinching him at the wrist.

He pulled his arm free but then she assailed him, grasping him by the throat as if to strangle him. Her touch was light, but his heart thudded with distress at the bizarre behavior.

He opened his mouth to protest and she released him. A moment later, she fled towards the house, a massive, five-story Elizabethan manor that towered all the more imposingly now, as though it had grown.

Henry stared after her in bewilderment, but before he could make any move, he heard his father's voice.

'Well? Did you propose?'

'Your Grace, did you not see how she comported herself?' Henry

demanded, turning to face him.

The Duke was in full military regalia, as though he intended to present himself as an officer to the King himself. He glowered at Henry menacingly. ‘Nonsense. You have a duty to your title and our family name, Linwood. Am I to understand you have shirked it once again?’

‘Shirked it? Your Grace, I have come all this way—almost into Wales itself—and everyday I bear the indignity of your condemnation and everyone else’s expectations as I navigate the marquess’s household—’

‘But have you proposed?’ the Duke demanded, advancing on Henry with clear hostility.

Henry was taken aback. His father’s ill opinion of him was nothing new, but this violent mood was unlike him. ‘I have not, Your Grace, but if you had only seen her a moment ago, you would agree that she is unsuitable—’

‘Unsuitable?! Her father, the Marquess of Corrach, is descended of a king!’

‘She is mad, Your Grace! She sought to strangle me—!’

‘Damned claptrap!’ his father bellowed, and he rushed Henry, then took hold of his throat just as Lady Alfreda had.

Henry choked and tried to struggle, but found that all the strength had seeped from his body and he was incapable of moving.

The Duke released him a moment later, and Henry retreated into the fog.

I shall never return, he thought fervently, as he lost himself in it.

Chapter 5

Rosalind still knelt beside the stranger, wringing her hands in her lap as she studied him with increasing agitation.

What shall I do?

Oh, Bertie, what I wouldn't give for all of this to be but a dream from which I might awaken. How can I refuse aid to this gentleman? But how can I willingly endanger you?

Rosalind used the hem of her dress to tab lightly at the wound on the fellow's head, trying to better see the extent of it, but even as she did so, the certainty that he needed more help than she could give was taking root in her heart.

'Confound those wretched Spenceans,' she muttered.

'Twas the Spenceans who had ruined everything, four years ago. Or a combination of the Spenceans, and Bertie's youthful idealism, and her dutiful trust in her father's invincibility.

The Spenceans were radicals; citizens of England convinced that reform was not just necessary, but vital to the health of the nation. They advocated for many things, most of them ideals that Rosalind herself found admirable. The trouble was, a faction of the Spenceans had given up on the hope that reform could be achieved peacefully. They looked to the revolution in France for inspiration. They wished for riots and violence to do the work of change for them.

And Bertie had come under their spell.

In those days, he had still confided in her. He thought her a perfect ally, unable to accompany him to the speeches and demonstrations

due to the supervision of their parents, but cheering for his success and fully in agreement with all of the goals he had embraced. So he did not expect her to object when he told her of how his fellow revolutionaries planned to push the assembly of the second of December to become a riot. When she did object, he left in a rage, and Rosalind despaired. She turned to her father, telling him everything.

If I had never done that, he would still be alive today, in all likelihood, she thought miserably.

With a sigh, she stroked the hair away from the insensible man's forehead.

Another wound became visible when she did so, previously obscured by his thick hair.

'Oh, dash it all,' Rosalind breathed.

I cannot wait another moment.

But I cannot risk discovery by the marquess.

I must fetch Oma. It is the only way. I must hope she has the knowledge to help this poor fellow, or his death will stain my soul, I daresay.

With a whimper of distress, Rosalind scrambled to her feet and began to make her way, running when the flora allowed, to Oma's cottage. 'Twas several miles across the forest, outside of Breacott Village. Thorns and branches caught her sleeves and skirt, scratching her cheeks and tangling the curls that escaped her bonnet. She pulled roughly through, heedless of propriety or grace, thinking only of how little time she might have.

I hesitated too long!

Oh, if he dies…

Heaven forbid.

When she reached the cottage at last, she threw herself on the wooden door, pounding with both fists, quite beside herself with panic.

Eira swung the door open. ‘Why, Rosie, what by Jove is the matter?’

Rosalind burst into the little foyer, panting and wild-eyed. ‘Oh, Eira, there is a man—oh I waited too long I fear—I knew not what to do—’

Oma appeared, leaning heavily on her gnarled driftwood cane, acquired from a beach in Wales. She had a thick, knitted shawl of ivory wool wrapped tightly about her shoulders, and Rosalind’s heart sank. Was she ill?

‘Oma,’ she gasped, a sob escaping her.

‘Oh, *da da*,’ Oma muttered. ‘What is the matter, child?’

‘’Tis a man—badly injured, Oma,’ Rosalind wept. ‘I hesitated so long…I fear he will not survive.’

Oma straightened, her gaze becoming sharp. ‘Where is this man? Take me to him at once. Eira, bring my basket.’

The three ladies set out again together. ’Twas not such a mad dash through the woods this time, for Oma’s age would not allow it. Every moment that passed increased Rosalind’s distress, but she swallowed her tears and led Oma and Eira with focused determination.

When they came upon the fallen man Rosalind fell to her knees at his side, palpating his throat for a pulse. To her immense relief, she found it without difficulty.

Oma gave her an impatient little tap with her cane, and Rosalind made way for the older lady. She watched from the side, wringing her hands, as Oma set about examining the gentleman with Eira's assistance.

'He can be moved,' Oma declared. 'Rosalind, you take his shoulders. Eira his feet, ja? We must carry him to the gamekeeper's cabin.'

The abandoned cabin would provide shelter, as well as keeping him out of sight. Relief coloured the anxiety Rosalind still felt. She did as she was told, lifting him at the shoulders. He was terribly heavy.

'Is he badly injured, Oma?' she asked.

'Tisn't a happy sign that he has yet to wake,' Oma said.

Rosalind's heart lurched with dread. 'Have you no remedies for him?'

Oma snorted. 'Of course I have remedies, ja! Now, move along.'

After that Rosalind did not speak, saving her energy for carrying the man through the forest. Once they arrived at the cottage, she and Eira delved into the less damaged half of the house, where an old bed, the frame sagging, still remained. Using old blankets left there to rot, they made it up for him.

'I shall go home and find more bedding,' Eira said. 'And other supplies.'

With that the flaxen-haired girl ran off.

Meanwhile Oma had taken the sticklewort from Rosalind's basket and more supplies from her own, and was making a poultice.

Rosalind settled herself beside the invalid and set to cleaning his wounds using water from Oma's gourd. He stirred and her heart sped up.

'Oh, do wake up,' she murmured. 'Open your eyes, my lord.'

To her delight, he did.

His eyes, this close, were even more striking: the color of afternoon sunlight.

'Oh,' Rosalind gasped.

He blinked at her, then winced, raising a hand to the wounds.

Oma came to his side and clutched his hand, lowering it. 'Best not to touch the injuries, my lord,' she said.

Oma inspected the wounds now that Rosalind had cleaned them, whilst the gentleman looked about him with an air of deep confusion. 'What—what is this place?'

'An abandoned gamekeeper's cabin,' Rosalind said. 'Fear not, we shall have you right as rain soon enough, my lord, and you may return to the manor.'

Anxious that he might request to be taken there directly, she added, 'You mustn't be moved again so soon, my lord. I am certain you are missed, and we shall endeavor to care for you until you may safely go

back.'

'The manor?' he said, frowning.

'Yes, my lord. Corrach.'

'Corrach?' he echoed.

Oma peered at him. 'Have you heard the name?'

The fellow began to shake his head and then stopped, evidently due to pain.

'And what is your name, my lord?' Oma asked sharply.

Rosalind watched the man's face and saw the confusion turn to fear.

'I—By the Devil, I do not know!'

He sought to sit up, grimacing as the pain struck again, and Oma and Rosalind took hold of his shoulders and chest and eased him back down.

''Twould be most foolish to attempt to rise,' Oma scolded him. 'You must remain still.'

'Pray, do not be uneasy, my lord,' Rosalind added. 'We shall keep you comfortable and safe, and Oma is very knowledgeable with medicinal plants. You shall be well in no time.'

The fight abruptly left his body and he allowed them to settle him in the bed. As he closed his eyes, Oma drew Rosalind aside.

‘The next several hours, through the day and the night, are of utmost importance, ja? He must be watched very closely.’

Rosalind gave her a nod. ‘I may remain until nightfall, Oma.’

‘And Eira shall come for a time, and then I shall take her place.’

‘What’s the matter with him, Oma? Why doesn’t he know his own name?’

‘’Tis the consequence of his injuries, I daresay,’ Oma replied. ‘His memory has been clouded.’

‘What will happen? Will it be restored?’

Oma sighed, casting a furtive glance in the lord’s direction. ‘I do not know. It may, or it may not. Only time will tell.’

Chapter 6

Night fell and still Lord Linwood did not return.

Lady Alfreda stood by the window, conscious that the others observed her distress as a kind of spectacle. This was to be expected, as everyone knew she would soon be Lord Linwood's betrothed.

Present were all of the ladies and the older guests, as well as the marquess and marchioness themselves. Lady Alfreda wished especially to impress the Duke and Duchess of Kenling, Linwood's parents, with her aggrieved, elegant worrying.

That she chiefly suffered from impatience was her secret to keep; she was clever enough to know it was unbecoming. Instead, she must portray herself as alarmed and fearful, although she must take care to show concern without becoming so agitated as to be unalluring.

Her Grace the Duchess of Kenling sat fretfully on one of the sofas, plucking at her embroidery as if determined to ruin it. The Duke stood at her shoulder, his hands clasped tightly behind his back, his body stiff; but this was not out of the ordinary for him, so Alfreda was uncertain as to his true state of mind.

Lady Harriet Bardsley sat beside her sister, Lady Clara, on the other sofa. The elderly Earl of Wyndham had fallen asleep in the armchair closest the fire. His wife, the Countess of Wyndham, played lightly on the pianoforte. Had Alfreda truly felt nervous, the music would have been most disagreeable. As it was, she wondered why the silly woman thought anyone would welcome it.

All of the younger noblemen had ridden back out in search of Linwood, as well as a half a dozen grooms and two footmen.

'Surely they will find him soon,' Alfreda said, pleased to hear a

trembling note in her own voice. Most fitting for the future fiance to struggle with her fear for Linwood's well-being.

Her own mother nodded. 'Of course they shall,' she said, eyeing her husband, the Marquess. 'Although perhaps others should be sent as well?'

The Marquess scowled. 'We've over a dozen men in the search.'

''Twould make everyone easier, dear Corrach, if you sent a few more, I daresay,' the Marchioness said.

'Oh very well,' the Marquess sighed. He stepped out of the drawing room and spoke with the butler. When he returned, he announced, 'Mr. Parry said he will send the gardeners and the kitchen boys as well.'

'But what can have happened to him, Kenling?' the Duchess asked her husband unhappily. 'Why have they not yet returned with him?'

'You mustn't trouble yourself so, Madam,' the Duke replied.

'But it has been hours, Kenling. Hours.'

The Duke made a small noise, but no reply.

'Oh, my dear Duchess, fear not!' Lady Harriet said. 'They shall return with him presently, I feel it in my very bones!'

'Oh, yes, Your Grace, Lady Harriet has quite reliable bones,' Lady Clara put in earnestly. 'I swear by them, I do.'

'Oh,' said the Duchess miserably.

To Alfreda's silent vexation, Lady Clara began to prattle about her sister's bones and their prescient abilities.

The Duchess's distress had quite taken all the attention away from Alfreda. This would not do. She pressed a palm to her waist and gave a little sigh, wavering slightly.

'Good heavens, Lady Alfreda!' cried Lady Harriet, and a moment later the Duke himself had her by the arm and was leading her to the nearest chaise.

'Just like him,' the Duke muttered almost too low to hear.

Alfreda arched one eyebrow—was the Duke feeling as impatient as she? 'Twas an interesting thought. Schooling her expression, she thanked him faintly as she leaned against the back of the chaise. 'Twas the maroon brocade, unfortunately; not nearly as becoming to her colouring as the blue silk upholstered chaise only a few feet away.

There was nothing to be done about it, however, the Duke had chosen this one; and in any case, it might be better for her face to look more pale.

'You poor dear,' cooed Lady Harriet, who had come to her side and was fanning her with the little book she had been pretending to read.

'A rider!' cried Lady Clara, who had taken Alfreda's place at the window.

At last, Alfreda thought with acrimony. She was tiring of this charade of distress.

But when the young footman spoke with the Marquess, it was to

apologise most unhappily.

The Earl of Linwood had not been found.

Henry slept lightly, all the more so because the girl with the near-white hair kept waking him. When she left and the elderly woman came, he hoped he might be allowed to slumber more deeply, but this was not to be.

'My name is Henry,' he said when the crone woke him the second time. 'I've just recalled.'

'You may call me Oma Weiss,' she replied, pronouncing the 'W' as a 'V.' 'Do you remember anything more?'

Henry closed his eyes, but his mind was as dark as the night beyond the damaged walls of the cottage. 'No.'

Oma peered at him.

'Your eyes have improved,' she said cryptically.

Outside, he heard the baying of hounds. His whole body tensed as though in fear. Giving Oma a look of alarm, he shuddered under his blankets.

'They may look for you,' she said.

Henry shook his head almost involuntarily. 'Not me.'

Why does the sound of dogs trouble me so? Am I a fugitive?

Oma contemplated him placidly. 'You do not wish to be found.'

‘Nonsense,’ Henry snapped.

Why does my own name—save for ‘Henry’—alude me?

Where am I from?

And why does the prospect of learning the answer distress me so?

The light outside was changing.

‘Dawn,’ Oma said, following his gaze. ‘If you feel well enough, my daughter and I might go to the village and ask if anyone is known to be missing.’

‘I do not feel well at all!’ Henry exclaimed, feeling hot and ill-tempered. ‘I wish only to rest and you prevent me!’

‘Someone who has suffered such a blow to the head must be wary of sleep for many hours, my lord.’

‘Why do you call me that? I tell you my name is Henry!’

At that moment, the other girl arrived, coming into the cottage and closing the wooden door behind her. In the morning light, the rosy colour of her cheeks was muted, and the pallour of her face, contrasting with her chestnut hair, seemed ethereal. She carried a basket and smiled at Oma, and then at him.

Oma looked from Henry to the chestnut-haired girl and smiled. ‘Just what each needs, ja.’

This meant nothing to Henry, who was wrestling with his feelings of

helplessness and irritability.

‘I’ve brought a bit of tea and some cheese,’ the girl said.

‘Very good, Rosie,’ said Oma. ‘After he breaks his fast, he may sleep. We’ve watched him well, and the danger is past.’

Rosie. It seemed a fitting name, for her hair had highlights of red, and her cheeks were ruddy from walking in the cold morning air. Her eyes, upturned at the corners like a cat’s, were a stormy grey.

She was lovely, and Henry felt a strange pang in his heart when he looked at her. This contributed to his confusion, however. Did he know her? Why would he have such a response, unless he knew her?

‘Would you like your cheese now, my lord, or would you prefer to wait until I’ve made your tea?’ Rosie asked.

‘Do not call me that,’ Henry grouched. ‘My name is Henry.’

The girl’s face lit up. ‘Oh! You have recovered your memories!’

Oma shook her head, although her eyes twinkled as though she knew some secret. ‘No, just his given name.’

Henry felt another rush of frustration. Oma seemed to notice it, for she told Rosie to make the tea and bring the cheese with it, giving him some time to his own thoughts. He found he needed it.

Rosalind fussed over the tea, sneaking glances at Henry when he was not looking her way. A strange feeling of agitation was building within her, one for which she had no name. 'Twas unpleasant and yet energizing. More than anything, she felt unaccountably drawn to the man.

He was so very handsome. His wild brown hair framed a broad face, those piercing pupils of gold startling in the deep set eyes under thick, arched eyebrows. His body's form under the covers was large and powerful. A simmering strength dwelt within him, despite his injury.

How very strange it must be, Rosalind mused, to have lost everything but one's name. What was Henry thinking now? Did he truly remember nothing of who he was? He seemed calm. She thought she would be most distressed, if she experienced such a calamity.

And who was he, truly? The mystery of his identity fascinated her. He must be a lord, for he had been riding in the Marquess of Corrach's hunting party. He had none of the inflections of the Welsh, so he probably was visiting from elsewhere. But where?

'That tea shall wake the dead,' Oma said.

Rosalind startled. She had been gazing at Henry, stirring the tea thoughtlessly, letting the leaves steep long past necessity.

'Oh,' she said, and mixed water in.

'I'm off home, now, child,' Oma informed her. '"Twas a long night.'

'Of course, Oma,' Rosalind said, a sensation of gratitude welling up within her.

‘He may be allowed to sleep, as I said. See that he eats and drinks, but if it makes him ill, come fetch me without delay, ja?’

‘Yes, Oma.’

‘Rosie,’ Oma said, putting a bony hand on hers, ‘you must learn to put your own life first.’

Rosalind blinked, surprised and uncomprehending.

‘Caring for others is all good and well—indeed, we must depend on one another, or perish. But there also comes a time for one to make a choice—live for others, and give up one’s happiness, or forge a new path, to achieve the future one desires.’

Rosalind tried to understand what Oma was telling her. Her heartbeat accelerated, for she knew that Oma must have noticed how she stared at Henry. ’Twas a warning, of course. Not to let caring for Henry distract her from her future as a midwife. And Oma was right. Rosalind might find Henry handsome and fascinating, but he was a lord and soon enough he would return to Corrach Manor, and forget all about her. There was no future for her with him.

‘Of course, Oma,’ she said, swallowing.

I shall enjoy this chance to befriend a lord, she told herself. *What a diversion from my day to day trials! But I shan’t let it turn my head.*

Thus resolved, she took the tray of tea and cheese to Henry as Oma left.

I shan’t fall in love with him, in any case.

That would be very foolish indeed.

Chapter 7

Rosie remained with him for several hours, until he fell asleep.

At last, he was allowed to slumber uninterrupted. When he woke, ’twas full dark and he was alone.

’Twas cold, for the fire in the half-ruined hearth was out. Henry thought of standing to see to it, but just moving his head a little rewarded him with a sharp pain. He stilled himself. Once the pain subsided, he stirred enough to pull the covers more closely around him.

What a misfortune, to find myself trapped in a broken old cottage that lets in the wind and a bit of rain, as well.

And yet I suppose I should be glad it is not winter, or I should wake covered in a layer of snow, I daresay.

Henry closed his eyes again.

When he opened them, sunlight poured in through the holes in the roof. He groaned quietly, and a startling noise of scrambling made him turn his head abruptly. Pain blossomed. He saw not what had made the noise, only that some jars had been knocked from a shelf. The movement made him wince and he laid his head back in the pillow.

He closed his eyes, waiting for the ache to subside. It was beginning to do so when he heard the door swing in, and he opened his eyes. Rosie appeared, carrying her basket, and smiled at him.

The way his heart rose at the sight of her quite unsettled him

‘Good morning, Henry,’ she said cheerfully. ‘I trust you slept well.’

‘Save for the cold!’ Henry snapped, irritable and out of sorts. ‘And animals lurking.’

Rosie raised her eyebrows. ‘Oh, yes, I see the fire died in the night. Would you prefer to wait for your breakfast whilst I build it up again?’

‘I would prefer not to wake in the night half frozen!’

Rosie snorted. ‘I see. Well, I am certain you are accustomed to having some chambermaid come and light the fire in your hearth before dawn! But here, you’ve nothing like that.’

Henry glowered at her, unable to put into words why he felt so cross.

‘I daresay we should see to returning you to the marquess,’ Rosie said, setting down her basket and moving to the small pile of wood by the heart. ‘I shall speak to Oma on the matter later today.’

Henry did not want that.

He could not say why. It quite eluded him. But he wished very much not to come to the attention of the marquess. He wished not to leave this place.

How absurd! This cottage is a ruin! I shall die of exposure here.

And yet, he wished not to leave.

Henry gazed at the crouched form of the bonneted brunette building the fire with a little tinderbox from her basket. She seemed too

graceful for such a task. She was educated, he wagered, based on her speech. Why was an educated girl passing her days in a forest and building fires by hand? How would she have even come to know how to do so?

'Do you know how to write?' he asked.

Rosie glanced at him in surprise. 'Indeed I do,' she said.

'Very well, then. I shall dictate a letter to you.'

'A letter?'

'Yes, to inform the marquess that I am in safe hands.'

'Oh,' she said. Henry frowned; her face had paled.

'Is there a problem?'

''Tis only that I haven't any paper, my lord,' she said. 'I shall have to see if I can acquire some.'

'No paper?'

Henry could hardly imagine it, yet he knew that paper was dear. Many people of small means reused letters and found other ways to avoid buying paper. Rosie might very well be telling the truth.

'I prefer not to inform the marquess of my situation until I may do so myself,' he said, a sense of relief accompanying his words. It sounded, to his own ears, like a reasonable reason to delay.

‘Very well,’ Rosie said. ‘I shall endeavor to bring paper as soon as possible, and take your letter to the marquess myself, once it is done.’

Of course she would do nothing of the kind.

A pang of guilt pierced her when Henry replied, ‘Good.’

Oh, dash it all. What shall I do? I cannot have his letter alert the marquess to our whereabouts.

The old gamekeeper’s cottage was well within the walls surrounding Corrach’s vast grounds.

He shall I know I have trespassed, and in pursuing me, he is bound to find Bertie.

She turned her attention to making the tea, now that the fire had caught.

The lack of paper was an excuse. Bertie had paper in the little rickety desk at home. She could bring it with her the next time she came. But instead she planned to tell Henry she had not been able to acquire any, at least for a time.

With luck he shall recover quickly, and the matter shall resolve itself. He shall return to the manor and there shan’t be any need for a letter.

Coming to Henry’s side, she helped him lift his head so that she could adjust his pillows and prop him up a bit. What a thrill to touch his shoulders! His body was warm under her hands, and she looked away from him, her cheeks growing hot. Her movements became clumsy as she tried to help him.

‘You’ve dropped a cushion,’ Henry said.

Flustered, Rosalind nodded wordlessly and recovered the wayward cushion, tucking it under his back.

What a silly peagoose I am, she thought, vexed.

Rosalind busied herself with the little honeycake and piece of cheese she had brought, setting them on the plate and giving the food to Henry, who took it without a thank you, still scowling.

My heavens, he is ill-tempered. But I suppose one should expect it from a lord in such a situation.

She poured the tea and gave Henry the cup.

It did strike Rosalind as odd that Henry wished not to have anyone contact the marquess on his behalf. Why would it matter to him if Oma went to the manor to tell them of his injury? Of course, Rosalind feared exposure, and would not like it if Oma did so whilst Henry dwelt in the gamekeeper's cottage. But Rosalind suspected Oma would agree to wait until they could move Henry to the Weiss cottage. Oma had nothing to gain from revealing she had been inside the grounds either, even if she hadn't the added risk of exposing Bertie to think of. But once Henry was in the Weiss home, 'twas a simple matter to alert the marquess to the whereabouts of his lost guest. His lordship might have someone bring him back to the manor, or he might choose to leave him to convalesce with Oma, but either way, it seemed the most reasonable course of action. Henry's friends and perhaps family, if some were also present, must be most anxious indeed about his disappearance.

Rosalind eyed the lord, who was presently finishing the honeycake and sipping his tea.

I should wish to move him to Oma's as soon as possible, she thought, troubled. *And yet, I do not. Once he is there, I shan't have any reason to*

see him any longer, and he shall return to Corrach not long after. I suppose I shall miss my little diversion.

"Little diversion" seemed a poor description of this experience.

'Tis very selfish of me. I should wish to see him recovered and returned to his people, and for the danger to Bertie and myself to fade, as well. And yet, I cannot seem to feel the way I should.

'Thank you,' Henry said at last, setting down the empty cup.

''Twould seem you are recovering your appetite, my lord,' she said.

'I told you not to call me that. I am Henry.'

'Certainly, Henry,' she said, although uttering his given name felt very intimate and gave her stomach a bout of most uncomfortable flutters. ''Tis only that—well, you must be a lord. I saw you riding. You were following the marquess's hounds.'

Henry's face clouded at this information. His amber eyes looked away thoughtfully.

'Indeed, I do not recall,' he muttered. 'I might have been a lord, or perhaps merely a groomsman.'

'Oh, but look at your clothes,' Rosalind said, kneeling at the side of his low bed. She plucked at his sleeve, turning it so the sunlight caught the brocade. 'No groomsman wears such fine fabric.'

For a moment, Henry's face darkened, but then his eyes lingered on her hand, touching his arm. Rosalind's heart caught, and she sucked in a breath, suddenly flushing. Releasing his sleeve she stood and returned to her basket.

‘I brought you a book,’ she said, unable to say his name again, but avoiding ‘my lord’ since it annoyed him. ‘’Tis from an anonymous author, a novel…I daresay you shall think it a trifling tale, but I liked it when I read it some years ago.’

She offered him the book, and he reached out and took it, reading the title. ‘*Emma*?’ he said.

‘The name of the heroine,’ she explained.

Henry raised an eyebrow, peering at the cover.

‘Since you must remain abed for the time being,’ she said. ‘It may help you pass the time, I hope.’

‘Better than lying here alone with nothing to think about, I suppose,’ he muttered.

Rosalind felt a surge of sympathy. ‘Oh, how dreadful for you. Is it very awful, having no memories?’

Henry glared at her. ‘What a question! Of course it is!’

‘I beg your pardon,’ Rosalind said, offended. ‘I had no intention of asking a stupid question, only of expressing compassion for you, sir.’

Henry snorted. ‘And yet you succeeded better at the former than the latter!’

‘You are unbearably rude, sir!’ Rosalind snapped, her patience at an end. Her cheeks burned. ’Twas not like her to lose her composure. This gentleman had a most unsaluatory effect on her temperament.

She rose and packed up her basket, her movements stiff and abrupt.

‘I apologise, Rosie…’

The use of the pet name her intimates gave her startled Rosalind and she shot him a glare. ‘My name is Rosalind, and I would thank you to restrict yourself to it. Or Miss Read, if you wish to show better manners!’

Henry’s amber eyes were wide with surprise.

Rosalind felt another wave of dreadful humiliation.

This is quite insufferable.

She closed her basket and marched out of the door.

Chapter 8

When Rosalind returned to her home she found, to her dismay, that her mother was in a state of agitation.

‘Rosalind! Oh, perdition, where have you been?’

’Twas not yet noon, and she had expected her mother to engage in her usual morning habits, which often involved returning to her bed, or at most sitting near the fire and drowsing.

‘Why, Mama, what on earth is the matter?’

‘I looked for you everywhere! Outside with the chickens and the goat. In the kitchen. In your bedchamber! Where have you been?’

Bertie chose that moment to emerge from his own bedchamber. ‘Yes, Rosie, I should like to know as well. Mama has been making a dreadful racket, and I expected you’d see to her, but apparently you had gone off somewhere.’

‘Why didn’t *you* see to her?’ Rosalind asked with uncharacteristic verve.

‘I was writing letters!’ Bertie exclaimed. ‘And with a great deal of difficulty, I might add, given the interruptions. Where did you go?’

Rosalind felt her cheeks growing hot, although she couldn’t have said whether ’twas from irritation with Bertie or nerves over his persistent questioning of her whereabouts.

‘I was gathering dandelions for the chickens,’ Rosalind said.

Bertie's brow furrowed as he studied her face. 'Dandelions? And where are they now?'

Rosalind made a scoffing noise, but Bertie's suspicious air was most unsettling. 'I gave them to the chickens, of course.'

'And if I were to go outside this instant, would I see them eating these dandelions?'

'I daresay you would,' Rosalind replied, pleased with herself for having, in fact, pulled some dandelions for the chickens on her way home.

Bertie scowled at her and went to the window.

'Why do chickens need dandelions, anyway?' he demanded.

'Oh, Bertie, that's quite enough about dandelions,' Mrs. Read complained. 'Rosalind, I cannot find the silver! I wanted to count it, and I cannot find it!'

Rosalind's heart sank. A bad day, then. 'Now, now, Mama, I have seen to the silver, as you well know.'

'Seen to it,' meaning 'sold it.' They had not taken all of their silver when they fled, so panicked were they, and the pieces they had brought along hadn't lasted more than a month, once everything they now had was bought and paid for. But Mrs. Read would forget, sometimes.

'But I must count it, Rosalind! Show me where it is at once!'

Bertie rolled his eyes and went to the door. 'I've some things to attend

to,' he said. 'Letters to post and such. I shall return for dinner.'

Rosalind did not favor him with a reply, instead going to her mother and taking the lady's shaking hands in hers. 'Mama, do not trouble yourself so. I shall wash your hair, shall I? And after might I read to you for a little while?'

Mrs. Read so enjoyed having her hair washed that this distraction hardly ever failed. Indeed, today was no exception.

Rosalind set about heating some water, fretting all the while about Bertie. Dash him for being so clever. How could he suspect that she was hiding something? She had been careful.

If Henry was anything but a lord...

But he was a lord, there could be no mistake, and Bertie in his Spencean rebellion despised the nobility.

But what would Bertie do? 'Twould serve no purpose for him to interfere.

Except to make trouble for me, and for Henry.

And the temptation to make trouble for a lord would be most attractive to him.

And yet, what trouble could Bertie possibly make for Henry? Only to inform the marquess of his whereabouts, which Henry seemed to wish to delay, and even Bertie had the good sense to wait until they had moved Henry in any case. And Henry would have to return to the marquess eventually whatever his preferences may be.

No, Rosalind had to admit, what she really feared was Bertie's reaction. His outrage that she was assisting a lord, giving him some of

their food, hiding him... He would be incensed.

Rosalind set about tending to her mother, seating the lady in a chair and leaning her back over the basin on the table, enjoying the relaxation that took the place of distress on the lady's face as she began washing her hair.

Henry was sullen and disagreeable, and she did not understand why she felt so drawn to him. Despite his rude behavior, she already missed him, and wished she might find an excuse to go back into the forest that afternoon.

'Tis only that he presents a distraction, she told herself. *I have so little to entertain me that I find tending to a discontented, injured peer more appealing than my usual chores.*

The thought made Rosalind smile at herself. At least if she must seek some amusement, she helped another in the pursuit.

I do hope Bertie does not persist in suspecting me.

The whole affair shall be resolved in a matter of days, I daresay, and it seems unnecessary for Bertie to involve himself in any way.

Pouring a cup of water over her mother's hair, she rinsed the soap from it.

She would simply have to be more careful. She could not tarry long at the gamekeeper's cabin. She must always have an excuse, as well. 'Twas luck this morning that she had gathered dandelions. She mustn't fail to have some similar task as a reason for her outings.

Heaven willing, she might avoid discovery until Henry was gone for good.

Rosalind did not return the rest of the day. The flaxen-haired girl came, instead, bringing him a meal of bread, ham, and watered cider.

'And you are Miss...?' he asked, thinking of Rosalind's sharp words to him and feeling rather sheepish.

'Miss Weiss,' the girl said with a quick smile. She seemed more timid than Rosalind, and he found her less interesting.

'Where are we, Miss Weiss? Which region of England?'

'The Corrach March. Very near the border to Wales.'

A faint stirring of familiarity came with her words, but it dissipated just as quickly.

She unwrapped the bandages they had put on his head, and cleaned the wounds there, then wrapped it back up. After that, she busied herself tidying the ruined cottage whilst Henry ate. Then she built up the fire and took her leave.

Henry finished the food and pulled out the book Rosalind had given him. By his estimation, there must be at least two more hours of daylight. His head did not ache as much as it had, and he thought he might be capable of concentrating on the novel.

'*Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition...'*

He did not know how long he read before falling asleep. When he woke, 'twas at dawn, and the cool morning light showed on a pair of

large golden eyes staring at him balefully.

Henry suppressed a cringe of surprise. 'Twas only a cat. A young tom by the build and thickness of the neck; he was a golden and dark brown tabby, his coat well-suited to the environment.

'Well, and I suppose you're the fellow who made such a fracas the night before last?' Henry asked him softly.

The tom laid back his ears, hissed, and then bolted with such an air of offence that Henry was quite chastened.

His stomach growled. His head felt lighter. Evidently, despite his inability to stand, his recovery was underway. Henry shuffled himself into a more upright position and looked out of the window from his new vantage point. The view showed a dense forest, with mossy trees and plenty of brambles. A brown-feathered bird flitted from one branch to another. Henry watched it for a time, finding it peaceful to do so.

When the bird flew away, his attention turned to the book again, until movement in the corner of his eye brought his gaze out of the window again. Rosalind, picking her way through the wood. His heart lifted.

She glanced over her shoulder with a furtive manner, and Henry's curiosity was instantly piqued. Was she worried someone followed her? Why?

He settled back into his pillows as she disappeared from view, knowing she would come through the door shortly. Indeed, she did, and he was struck by her beauty. She was a strange combination of proper young lady and forest fae, with her turned up grey eyes and reddish chestnut hair. Today she wore a blue pelisse made of some good quality wool fabric, and he wondered at the sight of it. No farmer's daughter had such a pretty coat as that.

‘Good morning, sir,’ she said.

Henry suppressed a grimace. ’Twould seem she chose to avoid calling him ‘my lord’ as he had asked, but rather than use his given name, she reverted to ‘sir.’ It vexed him, but he also knew ’twas only to be expected. Given names were for intimates, and he was hardly that to her. Yet he found he disliked all the trappings of his alleged noble class, and wished to shed them. If only he might remember his surname, perhaps he might become Mr. — instead. Still, it eluded him.

Giving himself a shake, he replied to her, ‘Good morning, Miss Read.’

She glanced at him as she opened the ever-present basket, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

‘I feel an apology is required of me,’ he said after a pause, intrigued to see if the smile would widen. ‘I have been most disagreeable, and my injuries are no excuse. Pray forgive my incivility, Miss Read.’

Much to his delight, the smile did widen; indeed it illuminated her whole face.

‘All is forgiven, sir,’ she said as she went to the hearth and filled it with twigs she had collected.

‘I find you most puzzling, Miss Read,’ he blurted as she worked.

She looked at him, her brow furrowed. ‘How so?’

‘I cannot make out what kind of lady you are,’ he said. ‘You read novels and wear fine wool pelisses, yet you build fires without hesitation and seem quite at home in the forest.’

‘Oh,’ she said, and her cheeks coloured prettily. ‘There is no great mystery there. I am a gentleman’s daughter, but after my father’s death, my circumstances are very much different than they once were. Nothing all that unusual, I am afraid.’

Henry could think of nothing to reply, and instead watched her build the fire and light it with her little tinderbox.

When she was done, she began making his tea.

‘Do you live in this forest?’ he asked at last.

Her eyes cut to him in a furtive look. Then she said, ‘Not far from here.’

‘You seemed to wish to avoid detection when I watched you approach this morning.’

If her cheeks had gone rosy before, they flushed a deep red now. ‘Avoid detection? Me? How drole.’

‘It certainly seemed to be the case.’

‘Oh dear, it must be very dull, lying in that bed hour after hour, if you imagined I was creeping about the forest like some poacher,’ she laughed.

Henry sighed, laying his head back. He felt a wave of fatigue, despite his improvement. ‘I suppose you are correct,’ he said. ‘’Tis rather dull, although I cannot stand as of yet, to remedy the situation.’

‘Have you made an attempt?’

He told her of his disagreeable experiences simply moving his head too quickly.

'I daresay Oma would scold you for your efforts,' Rosalind said as she gave him his plate and his tea. 'She has said you should remain as still as you can. And she has not given me leave to help you to your feet yet.'

'Oma is very wise,' Henry remarked, taking a grateful sip, and Rosalind beamed at him.

'That she is. A "wise woman" such as those one hears stories of, as a matter of fact,' she said.

'Do sit with me if you please, Miss Read.'

She did so, settling herself at his bedside.

The fare today was bran porridge, made with goat's milk. 'Twas strange on his palate, and he knew he was unaccustomed to such simple food.

'Did you always live in the Corrach March?' he asked.

'No,' Rosalind said. 'We came here after my father died.'

'Where were you before?'

'Not far from London.' She gazed at him placidly, but he sensed a tension in her. She did not like to speak of the change in her life, he surmised, and could hardly blame her.

'I can picture some London streets,' he said thoughtfully. 'But not what

I was doing there.'

''Tis a good sign, in any case,' Rosalind said. 'You shall see, you shall recover all of your memories very soon, Henry.'

He dearly liked hearing his name from her lips. His eyes caught hers, and for a moment the air between them became charged. Her grey eyes widened slightly, and her lips parted in surprise. He would have liked to take her hand in his, he realized.

Flustered, Rosalind stood. 'I should see to tidying,' she said.

Henry was at a loss for words, and could only watch her. He wanted to tell her not to leave her seat, to speak with him, and more.

'There was a cat!' he blurted.

Arrested by the unexpected words, Rosalind stared at him. 'A cat?'

'Yes, a young tom, I wager. A striped fellow. When I woke. He was here.'

'Oh,' Rosalind said, her face softening with affection. 'I do believe you've met Aristotle.'

'Aristotle?' Henry echoed in disbelief.

She nodded, smiling. 'Yes. He's little more than an overgrown kitten. His mother found this cottage and made it her home some time ago. Clever cat. She had three kittens. I'm not surprised Aristotle was the first to risk being seen.'

'There are four cats living in this place?'

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘I’ve only spied one.’

‘I daresay the others are about. Perhaps you shall be fortunate enough to see another soon.’

‘And you say the one I met was named Aristotle? What are the others named?’

‘The mother is Hera, and then there is Socrates and finally, Hippolyta. They’re all smaller than Aristotle, however. Aristotle is going to be quite a large cat, I think.’

Henry considered this with a growing sense of delight. ‘Did you name them?’

‘I did,’ she owned. ‘I do not know why I thought of the Greeks, I confess. But the names suit them.’

Her cheeks had once again taken on a tint of rosy color he found charming. ‘I shall try to call him by name, should I encounter him again.’

‘You might offer him a bit of food, as well,’ she suggested. ‘He is always hungry. They all are.’

With that she set about tidying the cottage, and he could think of nothing more to say to capture her attention. He wished very much that she would sit back down with him again. He imagined how pleasant it would be to pass the time with her. They might play cards.

Here I lie in a half-ruined, cat-infested forest cottage, and I dream of playing cards!

But it was not the cards that held any allure, and he well knew it. 'Twas her. The situation was so strange, he did not know what to say or do. He could only watch her helplessly as she buzzed about the cottage and eventually left.

Chapter 9

Rosalind

Rosalind went to the Weiss cottage after leaving Henry.

Outside in the little back garden, Eira was hanging up the wash. Rosalind hurried to assist her, pleased to have a moment with her friend alone.

‘And how is our noble invalid this morning?’ Eira asked after they had greeted each other.

‘Oh, Eira, you would never have believed it. He apologised!’

‘No!’

‘Indeed, he did. He said he had been most uncivil and that his injuries did not excuse it.’

Eira laughed and shook her head, pinning a white sheet to the line. ‘I’d never have predicted it.’

‘I think he shall recover his memories soon,’ Rosalind said. ‘He can recall the streets of London, though not why he was there.’

Eira nodded but as she had a pin in her teeth, she did not reply.

Rosalind hung up a damp chemise. ‘’Twas strange,’ she said hesitantly. She was unsure of how to put her feelings into words.

‘How so?’

‘I sat with him for just a few minutes as he broke his fast. And I—well, there was an unsettling moment.’

Eira peered round the edge of a table cloth at Rosalind. ‘An unsettling moment? What do you mean? Was he unwell? Did he say something nonsensical? We should tell Oma, if so.’

‘No, no, nothing like that,’ Rosalind said, and busied herself with a bundle of wet napkins.

‘Oh,’ said Eira. ‘Oh!’ she repeated, except that this time she spoke with a power of realization. ‘I say, he *is* very handsome!’

The heat in Rosalind’s face spread like fire to her ears, and she knew she must be the color of Oma’s beet stew. ’Twas no use attempting any sort of denial in this state. ‘Oh Eira, I have the most astonishing thoughts about him.’

Eira giggled. ‘How well I can imagine!’

‘But ’tisn’t sensible,’ Rosalind fretted.

‘Oh, piffle! Tisn’t as though you think yourself soon to be betrothed,’ Eira said. ‘He is a handsome lord and from what you said, he may even reveal himself to have a charming side to his character, so who can blame you for dreaming a little? ’Tis only natural.’

A weight lifted from Rosalind’s heart. ‘Do you truly think so?’

‘Of course,’ Eira said. ‘I think he’s handsome. But I should like him more had he golden hair, I think. His features are too leonine for such dark hair.’

‘You think he should have a lion’s mane, then?’ Rosalind laughed.

Eira laughed with her. ‘And why not? A golden mane to match those eyes.’

‘His eyes are quite extraordinary, are they not?’

‘Oh yes. I’ve never seen the like.’

’Twas ever so pleasant to laugh and chat about Henry in such a way, and Rosalind felt greatly relieved. Eira was in the right: ’twas perfectly normal to find Henry interesting and handsome, and there was no cause to scold herself. She would not lose her head—or her heart.

Henry

After Rosalind left him alone—save for the invisible cats—Henry became filled with a strange sense of vexation.

This entire situation is intolerable.

The ruined cabin, with its tumbledown roof on one side, the cold draughts that cut through the room, the plain, rustic meals—how was it that he did not hate all of it? Indeed, he found none of the uncomfortable aspects of his circumstances troubling, and even if he had no memory of his real life, he knew that this was *not normal.*

And what of his memory loss? Why did he not seek desperately to recover his past life? He found he had a languid sense of comfort from the barrier in his mind. As though he might prefer never to remember! ‘Twas inconceivable. And yet, if he examined his feelings, he knew it to be true. He would be happier not knowing who he used to be.

Why? Why find quiet enjoyment among feral cats in a ruined cabin, happy to forget everything he once was? There could be only one explanation.

Rosalind.

She was a temptress of the first order, perhaps sent by the Devil himself.

Henry snorted at himself.

Oh certainly, Satan has made Rosalind to lead you astray.

Perhaps not. But my attraction to the lady is undeniable, and most

impractical.

The cabin, the amnesia, the lady—three strands winding together to create a new, secret world that existed like a dream. And Henry could not deny it: ‘twas a good dream. One from which he would prefer not to wake.

Lady Alfreda Howard dearly wished her parents had never invited the Duke and Duchess of Kenling and their odious son.

Of course, Lord Linwood was only odious because he had disappeared, and 'twas all the Duke and Duchess would speak of, when they were present at all. The Duchess had taken to remaining in her bedchamber, claiming she was too distressed and had become ill.

Alfreda had hoped this would mean a respite from the subject of Linwood's disappearance, but she found that even without his parents' presence, 'twas all anyone would discuss. Try as she might to distract the Bardsley sisters with new fashion plates she had received by post, or a game of cards, or calls for music, they always returned to the problem of Linwood.

'Might he have ridden into some nearby estate, and fallen there?' Lady Harriet Bardsley suggested for perhaps the fifth time.

Alfreda's father and mother, Alfreda, and all of the guests save for the Duke and Duchess, were taking tea, seated on white-painted chairs in the garden, for the day was sunny.

'We've sent boys to every estate within a hundred miles,' the Marquess replied crossly.

'Indeed, and Tolbert, Dedrick, and I rode to two of them, as well,' Lord Wyndham's son said, indicating the other two young gentlemen present.

'Perhaps an estate farther still?' Lady Harriet said.

'Oh, yes, perhaps a farther estate,' her sister, Lady Clara, agreed.

‘His horse returned within an hour of bolting,’ the elderly Lord Wyndham put in, in a rare moment of wakefulness. ‘He cannot have got very far and done so.’

‘But that is just the thing,’ Lady Harriet said as though his words encouraged her. ‘I feel that he is near. I feel it in my bones!’

Unable to bear another round of the sisters’ admiration for Lady Harriet’s bones, Alfreda rose to her feet.

‘I simply cannot remain still. My nerves are in such a state! I cannot bear to speak of Lord Linwood for another moment!’ she exclaimed, dabbing a dry eye.

‘Oh, you poor child,’ Lady Wyndham declared, but did not move from where she sat, and did not set down her tea.

‘I must have a walk,’ Alfreda said. ‘I shall walk and try to clear my head!’

With that she took up her skirts and marched briskly away.

A glance back showed that her mother was eyeing her with disapproval, but Alfreda knew the Marchioness would prefer for her daughter to go on an abrupt promenade rather than begin screaming at her guests to desist speaking on the topic of bones.

Everything had gone awry.

’Twas most vexing. She had thought her plans were set. Linwood was days from proposing, she had been convinced. And now...

Here she was, unbetrothed and the earl missing, and she might be in London, instead, with myriad chances to catch the eye of some new beau even if she had failed to achieve marriage after two Seasons. Oh, how her sisters would laugh if they saw her. Her mother had no doubt written to them about the whole catastrophe by now. Thank goodness Augusta was living in Sardinia with her husband, the Savoy prince. At least *she* was unlikely to arrive unannounced at any moment after receiving the news, delighted to gloat at Alfreda's expense. Arabella, on the other hand, might be counted on to do just that, if she could bestir her husband, the Duke of Mirklewick, to leave his estate. And knowing Arabella, she would find just the right way to convince him of Corrach's superior hunting in September, and they might very well alight within the week.

Alfreda's hands curled into fists at her sides as she strode altogether too quickly around the manicured portion of the gardens behind the house, the guests still within view on the terrace. Slipping deeper into the hedge rows to escape the sight of them, she passed the fountain, and hastened by the large boxwood. She lingered under the statue of Edward IV, gazing at him bitterly. If she had been born to a different family, what might her life have offered? If her sisters had not married so well, Alfreda might have accepted the first proposal she received, from the second son of a baron. But such a marriage was too far beneath her. She had refused him. Next there had been the Viscount Jarrett, and she had quite liked him! But a viscount? 'Twas unthinkable. How Augusta and Arabella would have looked down their noses at her, for the rest of their lives. The third proposal she received was from an aging earl, and she had considered it, but could not bring herself to face marriage to the old dotard. If she must give herself to some decrepit nobleman, he must be a Duke or a Prince.

These three proposals came to her in her first Season, and after the earl there were no more until the following year. To her dismay, the quality of her suitors plummeted. Fourth sons, baronets, and even a commoner with a high-born aunt seemed to believe she was within their grasp. 'Twas entirely unacceptable, and Alfreda refused them all. Her mother was quite beside herself with worry, and thus the Marchioness hatched the scheme of inviting the Duke of Kenling and his incorrigible son for the hunting season at Corrach Manor.

Alfreda turned her back on Edward IV, feeling this was all at its origin

the monarch's fault. She stalked back out of the hedgerows until she spied the terrace full of guests again, at this distance resembling ants in the shadow of the vast Elizabethan house. The Marchioness had invited them all by way of concealing the obvious intention to matchmake behind inviting the Duke and his son, the unmarried Earl of Linwood. Impotently, Alfreda despised them all. Lord Wyndham with his unsubtle snoring. Lady Wyndham with her false compassion. Lady Clara and her adoration for her sister. And most of all, Lady Harriet and her bedeviled bones!

She eyed Mr. Tolbert, Mr. Dedrick, and Lord Frye, the three young men they had invited along with the other guests. With Lord Linwood missing, must she now consider these gentlemen as potential suitors? Frye was the eldest son of the Earl of Wyndham, with a courtesy title of Viscount Frye. A viscount! Unthinkable. Already an earl was beneath her. She should have had a prince, like Augusta, or at least a duke, like Arabella. But Linwood would have to do; he was an earl who would inherit a dukedom, at least. Frye—she could not consider it. And Tolbert and Dedrick, a second and a fourth son respectively, were even worse.

'Twas intolerable. Utterly intolerable! She had thought to write her sisters in a matter of days to tell them of her good news. She had planned to choose a wedding gown, and speak of nothing but wedding menus and flowers and music for weeks and weeks. Instead, here she was, trapped in a house filled with idiots who insisted on speculating about the whereabouts of that lout, Linwood, and prattle on incessantly about the virtues of Lady Harriet's infernal bones!

If Arabella adds herself to the mix I shan't bear it.

'Oh, I shall burst into flame!' Alfreda declared to a startled squirrel who raced up and away in the branches of the trees overhead.

Linwood simply must return. There was no other remedy.

Alfreda stopped and dug her fingers into the fine muslin of her dress.

Well, if recovering Linwood is the answer, then I shall do whatever I must to make that happen.

Her father had sent boys out to every estate, to no avail. The young lords had ridden out to the nearest two, as well. The Marquess and the Duke had questioned everyone in Breacott and the nearest villages. What more could be done?

Surely if Linwood was found anywhere nearby, we would have had word by now.

Is he dead?

The servants and the lords had searched the forest for two days.

If he is dead, recovering him won't help anything.

Alfreda allowed herself a low growl of frustration, an utterance she would never have expressed if anyone was within hearing.

'My lady? Are you unwell?'

'Oh!' Alfreda cried, a hand flying to her mouth in shock.

'Twas a gardener. A young man, worrying his tweed hat between his hands in consternation.

'Oh, perdition,' Alfreda gasped, quite beside herself. 'No. No, I am *not* unwell.'

'Ah, yes, my lady, most pleased to hear it—'

‘That is to say *yes*! Yes, I *am* unwell!’

The fellow paled, the hands freezing with the hat in a dreadful twist.

‘*You* must help me,’ Alfreda declared, a sense of determination spurring her.

‘*I*, my lady?’

‘Yes,’ she insisted. ‘I require an agent. I require some fit person to see to things that no one seems capable of resolving!’

‘My lady?’ he choked.

‘*You* will be my agent. What is your name?’

‘I’m Padrig, my lady.’

‘Well, then, Padrig, I shall compensate you for your work, you can be sure. You must find Lord Linwood, Padrig, do you understand? I cannot bear his disappearance any longer.’

‘*O fy nuw,*’ Padrig muttered, then he cleared his throat, gazing at her with wide eyes. ‘My lady, I do understand your worry, an’ it becomes you well that you wish to take measures to find the lost lord, but I am only a gardener, my lady, and—’

‘Not another word,’ Alfreda snapped. ‘I shan’t listen to it. You shall be my agent, and you *shall* find Lord Linwood, and there is nothing else to say on the matter. I require a report on your progress tomorrow morning. Am I understood?’

Padrig swallowed. ‘Yes, my lady. Of course.’

And that was that.

Chapter 10

When Henry awoke in the early morning the following day, he became gradually aware of a warm weight on his ankles.

He was lying on his back, and could not see down the length of his own body to identify what it was. However, as it was quite pleasant, he did not move.

Staring up at the half-caved ceiling, he began a mental exercise he had invented the day before: he listed to himself the things he knew.

He was currently dwelling in a disused forest cottage in Corrach March, England, not far from Wales, near the estate of the Marquess of Corrach. 'Twas likely that Henry was one of the guests of the marquess, as Rosalind stated that she had seen him in the marquess's hunting party more than once.

Something about this knowledge troubled Henry very deeply. 'Twas as though he wished it not to be true.

Why not? Did I have some falling out with the marquess?

This did not resonate. The problem must lie elsewhere.

Pursuing this line of thought made him uneasy, so he returned to the exercise.

He knew the names of three people—four, if he counted his own, although that name remained incomplete—Miss Rosalind Read, Mrs. Weiss, known as 'Oma,' and her daughter Miss Eira Weiss. No other names came to him, no matter how he concentrated.

Well, there were the cats. Aristotle, Hera, Hippolyta, and Socrates.

And, come to think of it, he could recall their namesakes without difficulty: Aristotle and Socrates, the Greek philosophers, and Hera and Hippolyta, names of legend. His education seemed to have suffered no losses due to his injury.

'Take courage, my heart: you have been through worse than this. Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier; I have seen worse sights than this,' he thought, recalling lines from Homer's *Odyssey*.

And he remembered Shakespeare: *'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember.'*

Perhaps I should ask Rosalind if she might give me some rosemary to chew, Henry thought with a twist of bitterness. His affliction appeared hopeless to him.

As he let out a sigh the lump on his legs came alive, scrambled, and bolted.

'Ah,' Henry breathed. Which cat had it been? Aristotle, he guessed, although he could not be certain.

And what did Aristotle say about memory, he asked himself?

'Memory is the scribe of the soul,' he murmured.

Closing his eyes, he sighed again. *At the very least, I shall make new memories.*

New memories, beginning with Rosalind.

This thought cheered him. Who better to rebuild a life story with?

How he admired her. Her beauty, of course, but her strength of will, her intelligence, her equanimity...these qualities pleased him even more. His gratitude for her generous, unquestioning service to him in his time of need would never diminish.

She needn't have done it. She might have left him in the woods, or guided others to find him, or sought out the marquess at the first opportunity, but she respected his wishes, and instead hid him here, allowing him to recover.

Henry felt gratitude to Oma and Miss Weiss, as well, of course, but his mind and heart always returned to Rosalind.

Free now to move, Henry stretched his limbs. Energy was returning to his body, though he still hesitated to turn his head too quickly, and had not yet attempted to stand. Restlessness afflicted him, however. Whereas before he had felt too fatigued to mind his inactivity very much, as his strength returned he found the bedrest more wearisome.

Whoever I was before, I must have been active. I feel very strange, remaining abed.

The thought of riding gave him a sense of happiness, and that was comforting. The inexplicable dread he felt when he thought of the marquess and the estate troubled him. He wondered what could be so abominable that despite the loss of his memories, he still shuddered at the thought of confronting it. Knowing that at least one activity in his life must bring him joy was soothing. Surely all was not as fearful as it seemed. Perhaps the dread came simply from his mental confusion, and there was nothing to anticipate at all upon his return, save for the relief and welcome of his host.

'Lavender's blue, dilly dilly, lavender's green... when I am king, dilly dilly, you shall be queen...'

Hearing the light voice singing, Henry propped himself up to look out of the window. Rosalind. She seemed unconcerned about discovery today. He wondered what had changed.

Catching his eye through the window, she smiled and looked down shyly, no doubt flustered to have been caught singing. Her confusion was exquisitely charming. He gazed at the little smile that played upon her lips, wondering how sweet it might be to kiss her.

I should like to marry a girl like Rosalind.

The thought startled him, and on the heels of it came a wave of unease.

A flash of luscious dark blonde curls came to his mind's eye. A pouting mouth.

The stern voice of an older man, scolding and exasperated.

With a shudder, Henry squeezed his eyes shut, sitting upright in the bed.

He forced himself to breathe regularly, although his heartbeat raced.

Am I married? To a blonde?

If so, I wish never to see her again.

And who was the man?

A sense of dread curled about Henry and he pushed the soft touch of the memories away.

I do not wish to know.

Rosalind was humming as she let herself into the gamekeeper's cottage. This morning her cares were lighter; her mother had demanded one of Oma's tonics, so no one thought it strange in the least when Rosalind set out through the forest. She had little fear that Bertie might follow today. He disliked Oma and preferred to avoid her.

'Good morning, sir,' Rosalind said to Henry as she removed her bonnet and set down the basket, then turned her attention to the fire.

'Good morning,' he replied.

'And how was your night?' Rosalind asked, crouching to lay the logs in the hearth.

'I slept well, and when I woke I had one of the cats on my legs, although I was unable to ascertain which.'

Rosalind met his eyes and smiled. 'Aristotle, I should think.'

'I believe so as well,' he agreed, smiling back at her.

'And how is your head?'

His arched eyebrows rose. 'Why, I haven't any pain at all today,' he said in wonder. 'Oma's treatments are uncommonly effective.'

'That is good news,' Rosalind said. 'Perhaps after you break your fast we should endeavor to have a bit of a walk? Oma told me yesterday we might try.'

After a moment's consideration, Henry gave a nod. 'Very well. Let us make the attempt.'

As she unwrapped the goat cheese and bread she had brought, Rosalind glanced at Henry. Sitting up, the power of his body was much more evident. He looked much less an invalid, and much more a man reclining, just moments from action. Butterflies fluttered madly in her stomach as she considered him.

'Tis nothing to fret over, she reminded herself. *He is very handsome, Eira said so, and I like looking at him, nothing more.*

Swallowing against the agitation of her heart, Rosalind smiled at him again and handed him the plate of cheese and bread.

'Simple fare again, I am afraid,' she said.

'Delightful fare,' he replied with a sparkle in his eyes she had not seen before. He must be feeling better indeed. Indicating the chair, he said, 'Pray, sit with me.'

Rosalind took the seat and smoothed her skirts over her lap. She knew not what to say. 'Have you begun reading the novel I gave you?' she asked after a delay of silence that quite unnerved her.

He was chewing, and he raised his eyebrows to look at her apologetically.

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' she said with chagrin.

Waving a hand he dabbed his napkin to his mouth and smiled. 'No cause to apologise,' he said. 'I have, in fact, read more than half of *Emma*.'

‘And what do you think of it so far?’ she asked, genuinely curious.

‘The titular character strikes me as greatly flawed,’ he replied. ‘And yet I find I like her. ’Tis most perplexing.’

Rosalind laughed. ‘Indeed, I understand just what you mean, sir. I felt very much the same way about her.’

They chatted about the novel until Henry had finished his meal. Then with Rosalind’s assistance he rose to his feet. His chemise hung loosely to his hips, and he wore his breeches, but this was not attire Rosalind was accustomed to with men outside of family, and even then Bertie rarely showed himself thus. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks and tried with all her will to disregard how he was dressed.

There he stood without taking a step for some time, testing his strength and sense of balance.

‘Any dizziness?’ she inquired.

‘For a moment, but it has passed.’

He leaned a little on her arm, and she found the contact very pleasing.

‘Shall we attempt to cross the room?’ she asked.

‘Let’s,’ he agreed.

Rosalind gazed up at him, and he down at her, and neither moved for a long moment. It felt as though time had stopped. She marveled at the beauty of his eyes, golden like a sunrise, their lids slightly heavy as he looked at her with a tenderness that made her heart leap.

Oh my heavens, she thought, a kind of panic mixed with joy seizing her.

Looking away in confusion, she cleared her throat. ‘Very well,’ she said. ‘Let us cross.’

Henry took a step, holding her arm still, in a reversal of the usual way a woman held the arm of a gentleman. Rosalind didn’t mind; in fact she found she relished the sensation of his touch. He took another step, and then another, and her spirits rose with each.

‘How well you are doing!’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said, and released her arm. She tried to ignore the sense of loss and instead celebrate his success.

‘Bravo,’ she said as he stepped towards the door.

Then his pace hesitated, and she saw him waver. In a rush she was at his side again, and he rested an arm on her shoulders, closing his eyes.

‘I feel rather faint,’ he muttered.

Rosalind stood still, waiting to see if he recovered, or if she should help him back to the bed.

He let out a long breath and opened his eyes. Instantly, Rosalind became aware of his arm resting around her shoulders, and how close his face was to hers.

Henry’s heavy-lidded gaze met her eyes, and then flicked down to her mouth. Confusion and warmth washed through her. Such feelings—she had no words for them—they were so violent. Her breath caught

in her throat. Her heart pounded all out of proportion to what was happening. The musky scent of him. The heat of his body so close. The softness of his lips, so near to hers—

When his fingers brushed a strand of hair from her face, she was jolted to reality.

Alarmed, she pulled away from him. Then at once she regretted it, and reached out.

‘Oh, Henry, pray, forgive me—’

‘No, ’tis I—’

‘Do you need help?’

‘Forgive me, I forgot myself—’

‘Let’s return you to the bed at once,’ she said, and took his arm firmly, guiding him. Henry allowed himself to be led, but Rosalind could not ignore how close his mouth was to her hair. She felt his breath on her ear.

She trembled with something—some emotion—what was happening to her? She had felt drawn to Henry before, but now—now ’twas as though she struggled not to fall into his arms, as though he was an abyss and she would tumble into it without ever finding the bottom. How could she hold herself afar from him?

‘Rosalind, I beg you,’ he said as he eased onto the bed, ‘I—I—’

‘Speak no more, sir,’ she said in a rush. ‘You are fatigued, I daresay, from rising. ’Tis to be expected.’

Now that he was safely sitting on the bed, its aging frame sagging under his weight, she stepped back, smoothing her damp palms over her skirt.

'There,' she said. 'I think that shall do for one day. Oh, and I say, that fire shall gutter if it isn't tended to. I shall see to it.'

After fussing over the fire for a moment, she found she could not bear to remain in the cabin a moment longer.

'Good day, Henry,' she said, and then flushed at the use of his given name.

Which is foolish! He told me to use it!

But nothing could be done to recover her composure. Henry watched her with wide amber eyes, apparently struck dumb by her behavior.

'I really must be going. My mother requires some of Oma's digestive tonic. Which I suppose you needn't hear about at all, only, I must be going—'

She bit her lip to stop the stream of babble pouring from her. With a quick curtsey, she fled.

Chapter 11

The following day, at Rosalind's request, Oma and Eira met her at the gamekeeper's cabin and accompanied her inside.

The day before, when she went to the Weiss cottage, Rosalind had not found the words to tell either of them what had happened. Indeed, she had no words to describe it to herself. They had noticed her agitation, of course, and agreed to meet her today, but Rosalind mused that they likely found her distress rather baffling. The wide eyes they watched her with confirmed it.

When the three ladies entered, Henry was seated on one of the two well-worn wooden chairs that had survived in the cottage despite partial exposure to the elements.

'Good morning, my ladies,' he said.

Good heavens, but he is handsome, thought Rosalind in dismay as everyone returned his greeting.

He had combed back his hair from his face with his fingers, she surmised, and he held himself with that subtle grace she had noticed for the first time the day before. He had pulled his dark blue coat on over the chemise and breeches, although everything hung loosely, untucked and relaxed. Still, the presence of the coat made a difference, and Rosalind found it easier to regard him than she had the day before.

The ladies removed their bonnets. Eira and Rosalind worked together on the fire and Oma examined Henry, peering through spectacles at the wounds on his scalp. She asked him brisk, businesslike questions.

'Any pain?'

‘Not really. A twinge at times if I move too abruptly.’

‘Fever or chills?’

‘No.’

‘When you rose, any dizziness?’

‘Some, but it passed.’

‘Have you an appetite?’

‘Indeed, I do.’

With that Oma unpacked the basket she had brought. There were apples, hard cheese, a small loaf of bread full of seeds, and a thunk of salted ham.

‘How delightful,’ Henry said appreciatively.

Rosalind coaxed the fire to light and stood, smoothing her skirt. Eira caught her eye, and Rosalind was flustered to see that her friend was smirking.

She sees my discomfiture and it amuses her. The minx.

‘I am pleased to see that you have risen on your own today,’ Oma was saying as Henry ate his breakfast. ‘You are recovering your strength at a healthy pace.’

‘I have received excellent care,’ Henry remarked.

‘Walking a bit is a wise choice, although just within the cottage today, ja? Tomorrow perhaps you may attempt the forest for a short time.’

‘I look forward to it.’

‘And if that goes well, I daresay we shall be ready to move you to our own cottage,’ Eira said. She glanced at Rosalind as if concerned about how she might take such an announcement.

‘Ja,’ Oma agreed. ‘Two days more rest, and then the move shan’t be too much for you.’

Two days?

Two days until I lose him forever.

For after he moved to the Weiss cottage, she no longer had any reason to tend to him, and he would return to Corrach Manor in due course.

Surely I may find some reason to visit Oma or Eira before then.

Oh, Rosalind. You must accept reality. Even if you do manage a visit or two, he shall disappear from your life soon enough.

A terrible wrenching took hold of her heart, and Rosalind had to pretend to fix one of the fire’s logs to hide her eyes as they filled with tears.

This will not do, Rosalind! Master yourself at once!

But the truth was undeniable.

Can it be true? Can these feelings be real?

Her heart's suffering was undeniable evidence.

I do not know how it can be, but I love him. Oh, heaven help me. I love him! I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with him.

Madness. This is madness, Rosalind.

I cannot help it.

She recovered some of her composure and began tidying up, glancing at Henry and Oma, who chatted together about the forest, the season, the changing weather.

'Rosie, you look so pale,' Eira whispered as she swept the floor, where leaves had accumulated since the previous day.

'Do I? I do not know why,' Rosalind muttered, her thoughts as scattered as the leaves.

'I have been mistaken, dear Rosie,' Eira said. 'And I apologise.'

'How so?'

'I thought your feelings for him shallow. Calf-love.'

Rosalind could formulate no response to this.

Eira frowned, peering at her. 'I see now that I could not have been

more wrong. 'Tis true love!'

'And what if 'tis so?' Rosalind said dismally. 'It changes nothing.'

'Have you not noticed how he looks at you?'

Rosalind thought back to the day before, her heart fluttering as she saw in her mind's eye the tender way he had regarded her. 'I—I think I have, in fact.' A sigh shuddered from her. 'But it matters not.'

'How can you say that?' Eira hissed in consternation.

'Because he is a *lord*, Eira! He may have forgotten, but I have not.'

Henry

Henry noticed the hushed argument between the two young ladies as they tidied the cottage, but could not make out what the matter was. He might have listened more closely, but for Oma Weiss, who was sitting with him and making conversation.

'No frost yet in the early morn,' Oma was saying. 'I think winter may be late in coming this year, ja.'

Henry nodded, endeavoring to appear to be engrossed in what she was saying whilst still attempting to ascertain what troubled Miss Weiss and Rosalind.

Allowing himself a quick glance in their direction, he was struck once again by Rosalind's charming beauty. Her glossy chestnut hair fell in curls about her ears, the heavy weight of the rest of it pinned up in a high chignon. Her merry eyes, tilted at the corners, looked large and dark today—full of care rather than joy. Her cheeks were not rosy, he noticed. They had always been rosy, until now. He had so enjoyed it when she flushed, uneasy in his presence, prettily flustered as she often seemed to be. But today, he saw, she was not her usual self.

Concern filled him. Something was troubling her. Something was not right.

But what?

An unpleasant thought seized Henry: he knew very little about her. He could not begin to guess what might be distressing her now.

With how much of her life have you any familiarity? You let her serve you, you enjoy her beauty and intelligence, but how little you even know her!

Chagrined, Henry looked down at his plate. He had finished his breakfast.

How much of a burden have I created for these ladies? he wondered. *They have opened their larders for me, but had they enough for themselves?*

Was that the source of the disagreement between the young ladies?

When I return to my life, I must see to it that they are compensated generously.

This resolution reassured him, but on the heels of it came the now-familiar dread.

I wish I might never return to my old life.

But why?

His eyes found Rosalind again. An aching sense of longing filled him. How he yearned to touch her as he had the day before—how he desired to put his arms around her, and kiss her sweet lips.

Can it be—?

I love her?

Of course, his heart replied. *Of course, I do.*

In that instant he was seized with the most fervent wish to tell her. Only the presence of the Weiss ladies prevented him from beckoning her—nay, from rising to his unsteady legs and crossing to her side.

He might have proposed on the spot! To marry her seemed the only way forward.

But then his reason interrupted.

Marry her? Impossible, when you know not even your own name!

Henry leaned back in his chair, and was rewarded with a creak from its wooden frame. He covered his mouth with his hand, dismayed. Oma had long since given up conversing with him, he realized abstractly. He noticed now that she was packing up their things. They would be leaving soon.

He could think of nothing to say to delay them. He watched in helpless vexation, his thoughts in a storm.

This situation is wholly intolerable, he lamented, but he could think of no remedy.

No name. No name, his mind repeated as if to taunt him.

I shall lose Rosalind, in all likelihood. How can I prevent it? And if I recover, what guarantee have I that the circumstances of my life should allow me to pursue her?

A severe pain accompanied the last thought, and he knew it revealed the nature of the dread he carried with him.

Whatever my family name, whatever my title, there can be no doubt: I should be barred from courting a lowly girl like Rosalind. I know that is the truth, even if the details still elude me.

'Take up the ashes by the hearth, Eira,' Oma Weiss was saying as the ladies finished readying themselves to leave.

Grief welled up within Henry's heart, and fast on its tail came a furious anger, quite startling in its intensity.

By the Devil, I cannot bear to give her up.

Yet even as his heart rebelled, his tongue remained quiet in his mouth until it came time to exchange farewells.

'I shall return later, of course,' Miss Weiss said, for she was the one who brought his dinner.

'And perhaps I might see you tomorrow,' murmured Rosalind. 'Although 'tis Miss Weiss who shall come in the morning.'

Henry gave her a pained smile and a nod as this heart twisted with joy and suffering in equal parts.

I reject whatever duty might prevent me from my happiness, he thought darkly. *I shan't stand for it. I love her, and I shan't deny it.*

Chapter 12

For the rest of that day and the first hours of the next, Rosalind's heart would give her no respite from thoughts of Henry. Every pulse of blood in her veins rushed her with longing to be near him. Every breath that she took filled her body with overwhelming desire.

'Lavender's green, dilly, dilly, lavender's blue. If you love me, dilly, dilly, I will love you,' she sang in a whisper as she rose that morning. Washing her face in the icy water of her basin, she dressed quietly so as not to wake her mother and brother, reducing the song to a hum.

'Who told you so, dilly dilly, who told you so?' she murmured as she fed the chickens, her mind's eye filled with images of Henry, his powerful body, his golden eyes, his handsome face...

''Twas my own heart, dilly dilly, that told me so...'

The chickens were unimpressed with her singing and went about their business, pecking and clucking peacefully. But there was no peace for Rosalind's unruly heart.

Oma had given her a dozen small apple cakes the day before, which she served to Bertie and Mrs. Read once they rose. Still she sang softly to herself, thoughtless of their presence and slow to respond when spoken to.

'I say, Rosie. Did the post come or not?' Bertie demanded peevishly.

'Oh,' she said in surprise. 'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Confound it,' Bertie grunted.

But his ill-humor was not enough to distract her from her thoughts. This was the first morning she had not gone to tend to Henry, and she missed doing so with a sharp ache. Nothing could take her mind from him. Helplessly, Rosalind went back to her chores and reveries.

As she served her mother and brother tea and Oma's cakes, she allowed herself to dream of impossibilities. Henry, she imagined, would ask her to marry him, and take her with him when he returned to Corrach Manor. There, she would meet the marquess. She would curtsey, and be very graceful, and make a very fine impression on all of the peers there.

As she tidied up after the morning meal, she dreamed that Henry might discover that he was not a lord at all, but a gentleman, perhaps distantly related to the marquess and beloved of the nobleman's family, but not so high in rank after all. No one, then, would have any reason to object to their union.

Tending to the needs of the goat, Rosalind pictured her wedding day: she would wear a lovely gown of fine muslin, perhaps, or, if the weather was cold, perhaps velvet or wool. Her practical mind asked where she would acquire this gown, but she brushed such questions aside. She would find dog roses for her hair and bouquet, for they bloomed in autumn here, or meadowsweet, foamy and white. How she would love to have some silk ribbon with which to tie the flowers.

Henry would be unimaginably handsome, of course. His coat would be of fine wool or velvet, as well, with a boutonniere made of dog roses and meadowsweet, just like her bouquet. She could see him waiting for her, standing before the minister, smiling with that light in his eyes and the subtle air of mischief he had, his powerful body healed and strong, full of suppressed energy just waiting for the vows to be finished before he swept her into his arms and carried her away with him!

Rosalind sighed and tears pricked her eyes as she remembered herself. She was standing by the well, ready to bring up the bucket so she could scrub the kitchen floor.

‘A fine lady I should make,’ she mocked herself.

If I must wash floors and serve food, perhaps the answer is a maid’s post in a manor house.

Henry’s manor house?

The thought arrested her. ’Twas both pitiful and enticing at once. Pitiful, for would she truly choose a life as a servant in his house, simply to remain close to him? And enticing, for she thought perhaps the answer might be yes.

And what of Mama and Bertie, then, Rosalind?

I might send home my wages, to keep them provided for.

Nonsense. Bertie shan’t care for Mama as she needs, and you know it. You must remain here to see to her. There is no leaving this place.

A wave of despair crashed through her, so powerful she had to sit on the little stool she kept in the corner of the kitchen. Pressing a palm to her breast, she tried to breathe through the pain.

How has it come to such extremes? she wondered. *I was well enough before I met Henry, wasn’t I?*

No. I was not. I had no wish to face the future laid before me. Only, there was no alternative, however fantastical. Now, an alternative—impossible though it may be—presents itself. And thus my heart can no longer bear the weight of this life.

Rosalind shook her head silently, pressing her hand harder to her breast.

This will not do. I must be sensible.

But her heart continued to break.

'I cannot bear it,' she whispered.

Closing her eyes, she attempted to bring her wild emotions into check, but they would not be calmed.

'I must see him. Oh, heaven help me. I must see him now.'

Her heart began to thump with excitement. The agitation made it difficult to see clearly, she was in such a sudden hurry. Bertie started as she passed through the parlour in search of her bonnet.

'What's the matter?' he called after her, rising from his chair. 'Where are you going?'

Grasping her bonnet in both hands, Rosalind whirled to face him.

'I—' she said, but stopped short. What excuse could she give him that would dissuade him from seeking out the truth?

'Rosie, are you unwell?' he asked with a note of genuine concern.

A pang of guilt added itself to the turmoil of her heart.

I cannot bear it. I cannot bear any of it!

'I—' she began again, and once more, stopped. Then her face

smoothed as she found the answer. ‘In truth, I am. I am unwell, Bertie.’

Furrowing his brow, Bertie leaned closer. ‘What ails you?’

‘’Tis a feminine trouble, alas,’ she replied, and was instantly rewarded when he recoiled, aghast. ‘I must see Oma Weiss without delay.’

With that, she put on her bonnet and breezed past him, walking resolutely out of the door.

Henry was so entirely engrossed in Emma's confrontation with her friend Harriet over the much admired Mr. Knightly that he noticed neither the four pair of feline eyes studying him nor the approach of his own beloved Rosalind. When the door abruptly opened the resulting scrabble and hissing explosion so alarmed him that he fumbled the book.

'Oh my heavens,' Rosalind exclaimed as four streaks of fur dashed from the cottage through windows and holes in the ceiling.

Henry met her gaze and laughed, and she joined him.

'How singular,' she observed. 'You seem to fascinate them.'

'Indeed, I should like very much to befriend them, but they only approach when I am insensible either in sleep or reading.'

Her smile widened and she came nearer. 'Have you progressed with *Emma,* then?'

'Indeed, 'twould seem I near the end,' he said, showing her where he had left off.

'And it entertains you still?'

'I should say so,' Henry asserted. 'I was so thoroughly convinced of my presence in Highbury that I quite forgot Corrach March.'

She beamed at him. 'I am delighted that the novel has diverted you so.'

‘I like it very much,’ Henry agreed.

She looked around then, as if searching for something to do. The fire was low, for Miss Weiss would rebuild it when she came, some hours from now. Rosalind removed her bonnet and began tending it.

‘I had not hoped to have a visit from you this afternoon,’ Henry said.

‘No?’ Rosalind replied, her cheeks pinking. Her eyes did not leave the logs she shifted in the hearth. ‘And yet I mentioned I might come by.’

‘And I am glad you did.’

She glanced up at him then. Sucking in her lip, she seemed on the verge of some pronouncement. Then the moment passed, and she turned her attention back to the fire.

‘That should stave off the chill. A north wind is starting, I fear,’ she said, standing.

‘Oma mentioned it,’ he said.

Shall I remain abed, speaking of the weather with her? This is insufferable.

‘Rosalind, I—’

‘Henry, when—’

They had spoken at once, and both froze.

Rosalind let out a light laugh. ‘Pray, speak your mind, sir.’

Henry grimaced at the ‘sir,’ but reminded himself ’twas to be expected. ‘No, I beg you, you must tell me what you had to say, first.’

She blinked prettily and her eyes flicked around the room in agitation. ‘I only wondered—would you like to walk outside? Just a little?’

His heart felt swollen with emotion, and he had to clear his throat before he replied. ‘I should like that very much.’

And so it was that Rosalind helped Henry on with his coat and boots. ’Twas the first time he had worn the latter since his fall. He stood in them, feeling a sense of restored balance. Rosalind slipped an arm through his and led him carefully across the room to the door.

‘Ready?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes.’

She looked up at him, and he down at her, and the air between them thickened with unspoken words and desires denied. Henry ardently wished he might take her chin in his hand and hold it whilst he kissed her mouth, but he was still too uncertain.

What do I have to offer her? I know nothing of my true life.

He saw her delicate throat swallow, and she tore her eyes from his, pushing the door.

The air beyond the door had a fresher scent, even though the cottage was open to the outside due to the caved-in roof and broken wall windows on two sides. Still, it felt significant to cross the threshold, arm in arm with Rosalind. Henry looked about, taking in the sight of the trees, bushes, and brambles. He had gazed often enough out of the

window this last week, and yet he felt he saw everything anew. The season was turning; one could smell winter at the edges of the air. The last butterflies flitted over a patch of wild ivy blooms. A flapping in a tall tree drew his eye and he spied a red kite, a bird of prey distinctive due to its forked tail. Many leaves were beginning to turn, he noticed, adding touches of gold and red to the green of the wood.

'Shall we stop?' Rosalind asked with concern. 'Are you fatigued?'

'Not at all,' Henry replied.

'Very well, then,' she said, and led him into a narrow forest path. They walked slowly, which he understood to be wise, as roots often twisted across the path and he knew another fall would do him no good.

They had only gone a little way when he saw sunlight ahead through the leaves.

'I wanted to show you a clearing nearby,' Rosalind said, leading him onward.

The trees opened up to reveal a small meadow covered in daisy-like flowers growing in bundles, in shades ranging from yellow to a deep orange-red. Bees and butterflies seemed to like them very much.

'Foxes-and-cubs,' Rosalind said, smiling. 'Aren't they lovely?'

'Truly lovely,' Henry said huskily, gazing down at her.

Her smile softened as she met his eyes. Her arm slipped from him, but he took hold of her hands in his.

He could bear the temptation no longer. He leaned in and kissed her lips.

She smelled of warm sage and honey. Pressing her mouth with his own, he inhaled the scent of her, wrapping his arms around her to hold her closer. She melted against him, her head rocking back as she yielded in his arms.

Nothing ever felt so perfect. He loved the sensation of her weight against him, the warmth of her lips, the flutter of her lashes against his cheek.

At last he pulled away, looking into her grey eyes. She met his gaze, but lowered her face so she soon peered up at him through her eyelashes, a look that might have seemed coy on another, but spoke only of innocence and uncertainty in her.

‘Rosalind,’ he said, enjoying the taste of her name on his tongue.

She flushed and smiled, still shyly gazing up at him.

‘Dearest Rosalind,’ he said. ‘I hope you know how much I admire and esteem you. And despite my behavior, I have only the most honorable of intentions toward you.’

She looked down then, seeming to grow more flustered.

‘I shall marry you, I vow,’ he said with earnest sincerity. ‘I know I am not...as I should be, yet. ’Tis a strange circumstance we find ourselves in.’

‘Indeed, Henry, but you must be sensible,’ she said, pulling free of his embrace. ‘You are a lord.’

‘And if I am, what difference does it make? A lord may choose whoever he likes as his wife,’ Henry asserted quite without

confidence.

Rosalind gave a dry little laugh. He did not like the bitterness in it.

‘It has been my misfortune to find that no one may choose to marry whomever they like,’ Rosalind said. ‘Someone is always in love with someone else that they may not possess for one reason or another. An individual may even believe her future is secure, and yet a tragedy will change everything quite unexpectedly.’

Henry recognized that she spoke of her own loss in saying these things. ‘I am most aggrieved that you experienced such dire events, my dear,’ he said. ‘I promise you with all my heart that I shan’t allow any such reversal to come between us. I shall give you the happiest of lives, Rosalind. Say only that you will have an understanding with me?’

‘An understanding?’ she echoed.

‘Yes. Say that once my memory returns, or even if it does not, but I have sorted out my particulars and have recovered physically, you will consent to hear my proposal again. You may wait until then to give me an answer, if you prefer.’

‘Oh, Henry,’ she cried, meeting his eyes again at last. Her gaze was wide and open. ‘I need not wait to give you an answer. I can think of nothing I should like more in all the world than to become your wife, no matter what your memory holds!’

‘Then ’tis settled,’ he said, his voice jubilant. ‘We are betrothed.’

Chapter 13

Rosalind stayed with Henry until Eira came to give him his dinner. The ladies sat with him as he ate, chatting about matters of little import. When Eira prepared herself to leave, Rosalind walked out with her, leaving Henry within.

‘Oh, Eira, you shall be amazed at my news,’ Rosalind whispered to her friend as they walked some way down the wooded path.

‘Tell me everything!’

Rosalind relayed the events of earlier that day, her heart racing as she did. She could hardly believe any of it was real.

‘Why, how perfectly delightful!’ Eira exclaimed. ‘I knew he was a clever man. He shall see to everything, once he’s recovered, you must only be patient, Rosie.’

‘Do you really think so? Can a lord truly choose whom he wishes to marry?’

‘And why not?’

‘His family shall object.’

‘How can you know? Perhaps he begins to remember himself,’ Eira said. ‘Perhaps he has some sense for them, and that they would welcome you.’

‘Oh, I do hope you might be right.’

‘What a perfectly lovely turn of events,’ Eira said, beaming. ‘You deserve all of the happiness he can give you, dear Rosie.’

Rosalind returned her smile, her heart filled with joy.

‘I expect *you* shall be the one to tend to Henry tomorrow, dearest,’ Eira said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Rosalind embraced her friend and waved to her as she set out for home, then Rosalind turned along the path, heading back to Henry.

Never had the little ruined cottage seemed more charming than now, as she approached it. Rosalind loved everything around her. The trees with their changing leaves had never appeared more beautiful. The scent of pine and autumn mingled gave her the greatest pleasure.

I shall always remember this as the most perfect day.

She hardly dared imagine the future Henry promised her. No more midwifery. A house and children of her own! And a loving, handsome husband, who she might dote on, and who would dote on her. It was too wonderful to dream of.

What of Mama?

What of Bertie?

Rosalind hesitated outside of the cottage door, the intrusive thoughts dropping into the pool of joy in her heart like stones.

We shall find a solution for Mama, Henry and I. And surely Bertie, a grown man, may see to himself!

The latter thought carried with it a wild kind of rebellion she could scarcely face within herself.

After what happened to Papa, how can you think such a thing, Rosalind?

And yet her heart would not let the thought go.

Why must I be the one to look after Bertie? When does it end? Mustn't he take responsibility for his own life someday?

Rosalind wrung her hands, leaning against the door, her brow deeply furrowed.

Why should I give up a future of happiness for Bertie?

Because when you betrayed him, Papa died.

This truth was so devastating, she hardly had the courage to articulate it.

I do not deserve the happiness Henry offers me.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she pressed her forehead against the cool wood of the door.

Tisn't true.

It is! You know it is. You ruined everything. You do not deserve to escape the consequences.

What must I do?

You know.

Rosalind stifled a sob with her hand.

You must tell Henry you cannot marry him. Your place is here, caring for your family.

Another sob bubbled up, and she shuddered as she muffled it.

'I won't,' she whispered into her hands.

There was no question of going back into the cabin now, however, whatever she decided. She could not explain her distress to Henry without telling him everything, and telling him everything was not possible, not without endangering Bertie.

Full of confusion and consternation, Rosalind left the cottage and hastened home.

The Marquess of Corrach preferred to dine early, not keeping to the hours of Town, when he resided in his estate in the March. He and his guests enjoyed music, games, and other diversions after dining, gathering in the large drawing room, or sometimes in other parts of the manor, such as the game room or the music room, depending on how they had decided to amuse themselves.

Lady Alfreda was therefore able to excuse herself to retire to bed after an hour had passed. This she did regularly over several evenings, claiming to be fatigued and allowing everyone to assume that in fact she was greatly distressed by Lord Linwood's continued disappearance.

She did not, in reality, go to bed.

Rather, she started out in that direction, but took a turn when she reached the upstairs corridor, instead following the servants' staircase down to the kitchens and seeking out Padrig, the gardener.

The latter knew she was coming and would begin wringing his hat the moment the lords' dinner concluded.

As Alfreda approached Padrig, they left the kitchens and went outside.

'Twas a risk, but one Alfreda was willing to take. To be seen alone with a man would reflect very poorly on her, even if he was a servant. For some, *especially* if he was a servant. As if Alfreda might ever entertain the idea of a liaison with a gardner! Anyone who knew her should have more sense. Nevertheless, she looked about them, searching for witnesses, and only when she was satisfied that there were none, did she proceed.

'Well?' she demanded, as she had the previous nights, without any

sort of preamble.

‘Today I searched every square foot of the northern forest, my lady,’ Padrig said unhappily. ‘I found no sign of him.’

‘Confound it, Padrig!’ she snapped. ‘This shan’t do at all!’

‘I am most aggrieved, my lady,’ Padrig attempted to say.

‘Nonsense! You shirk your duties and laze about, then pretend to me that you’ve had no success!’

‘Not at all, my lady,’ Padrig protested. ‘Since you tasked me with searching for his lordship I’ve gone through the eastern and western woods, and today the northern.’

‘Pray you find him in the southern, tomorrow, then!’

‘I do pray for it, my lady.’

Without another word Alfreda turned on her heel, leaving in a huff.

’Twas because of this that she passed her father’s study that evening, and overheard voices. Alfreda paused and listened, and as the conversation revealed itself to her, she crept closer to the door, at last pressing her ear to it.

‘...must consider the possibility, Kenling.’

Her father was speaking with the Duke, Lord Linwood’s father.

‘Nonsense,’ the Duke replied sharply.

‘There’s been no sign of him! No sign at all!’

‘His horse returned. How do you propose to explain that? If he ran off, as you suggest, did he do so on foot?’

‘I cannot explain it,’ her father conceded. ‘In any case, we are all baffled, and I am afraid our plans for Alfreda and your son are in shambles. My wife wishes to return to London, so the girl can find another suitor.’

Alfreda bit her lip at this. London. Was that what she wanted? The prospect of having to seek out a new suitor, one who met her requirements, gave her a sense of deep exhaustion. She wished to be finished with the problem. Lord Linwood was the quickest means to that end.

Leaving the study she hastened to her mother’s bedchamber. The Marchioness called for her to enter when she knocked.

Her mother sat at her dressing table in a finely embroidered caftan as her lady’s maid unpinned her hair.

‘Alfreda, dear, is something the matter?’ she asked.

‘Mama, I do not wish to return to London.’

The Marchioness frowned into the mirror, meeting her daughter’s eyes. ‘Have you spoken with your father?’

‘No,’ said Alfreda, ‘but I overheard him mention it.’

‘My dear, the point of inviting the Duke and Duchess and all of the

rest of these tiresome people was to foster a betrothal between you and Lord Linwood. Now that he is missing, remaining at Corrach is a waste of time. You must realize it.'

'Mama, he shall return,' Alfreda asserted with more confidence than she felt. 'I wish to marry him, and no other.'

'Piffle,' Mama said. 'You wish to marry well, and that is admirable. But this avenue is closed. I shall speak with your father. Perhaps a voyage abroad is the thing. We shall find you a foreign prince, like Augusta.'

A tantalizing prospect, but Alfreda knew she had little chance of success. 'I shall be one and twenty in a month, Mama,' she said. 'I have failed at capturing a beau through two Seasons. I must be realistic. Linwood is the sure bet.'

'He's gone!' Mama exclaimed.

'He shall be found,' Alfreda said.

'He may very well be lying somewhere dead, my dear girl.'

'One more week!'

The Marchioness frowned at Alfreda. 'Really, you have set your heart on him?'

'Oh, Mama, I fear I shan't find another beau of equal quality,' Alfreda confessed with rare sincerity.

Her mother's frown deepened. 'Two days.'

Alfreda gave a nod and let out a breath of relief. ‘Very well,’ she agreed, thinking of Padrig and the southern forest.

I pray he finds Linwood there!

‘Two days,’ she said. ‘And you shall see, Mama. Linwood shall return.’

Chapter 14

Despite spending much of the night suffering as she fought with herself over her desires, Rosalind rose the following morning feeling excited and full of anticipation to see Henry. She managed to push aside her doubts, promising herself she would worry about what to do once Henry was ready to return to his life. Until then, everything was like a secret, wondrous dream, and there was no reason not to relish every moment of it.

Telling her mother and Bertie she had made plans to mushroom hunt with Oma, she set out for the gamekeeper's cottage, humming as she went. She checked behind her in case Bertie had decided to follow her today, but he had seemed preoccupied with his letters, and as she saw no sign of him, she relaxed and turned her attention to the morning ahead.

She had brought porridge and goat's milk in the basket, and Henry beamed at her when she laid out the fare.

'I finished *Emma* last night,' he told her, and they spent the rest of his meal discussing the book.

'Do you think that Emma was wrong to aim so high for Harriet?' Rosalind asked him.

'Wrong? No,' Henry replied thoughtfully. 'I suppose what was important was Harriet's happiness.'

'Yes, but it seems to me that several of the other couples are happier because they are equal in rank. Look at Mr. Weston and Miss Churchill. They were not happy; yet when he married again, his second marriage was more successful because they were of equal rank.'

Henry gazed at her with a pensive look. ‘Frank Churchill finds it necessary to conceal his engagement to Jane, for fear of his aunt’s disapproval, but in the end they are happy together, are they not?’

Rosalind smiled at the hopeful look in his eyes.

When he finished his meal, they left the cottage together, arm in arm. His energy was good so they walked through the forest, taking pleasure in each other’s company and the beauty that surrounded them. They returned to the clearing, where Rosalind gathered a bouquet of foxes-and-cubs, whilst Henry watched her. He surprised her, walking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

Rosalind flushed with pleasure, turning to face him, still encircled in his strong embrace. He gazed down at her, and she marveled at his leonine features, the unruly brown hair, the golden eyes, the powerful bone structure of his face. When he was smiling, his mouth looked soft and inviting.

Her body yielded against his, quite without a conscious choice on her part, as if it loved his body just as she loved his person. *I am his,* her body seemed to say, and she delighted in the thrill of his touch combined with the warm safety of his arms.

Tilting her head back, her eyelids grew heavy with longing. He responded by lowering his mouth to hers. She melted into the kiss, reveling in the sensations washing through her. HIs hands supported her back, hot even through the gingham of her dress.

This. This forevermore.

He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers as he pulled away, his eyes devouring her as though he hungered for her. The look on his face made her stomach flutter.

If he became my husband, we should remain together like this, always.

How I wish it could be so.

There was a sadness in the depth of Rosalind's grey eyes that troubled Henry. He tightened his embrace, wishing to protect her from anything that grieved her.

Lightly, she kissed his lips again, and then pulled away, returning to gathering flowers. Henry rejoiced in watching her. She was like a fairy in this clearing, beautiful, ethereal, and mischievous. She glanced at him with sparkling eyes, and he chuckled in pure delight.

Nevertheless his recovery was not yet complete, and weariness tugged at him. Unwilling to say that they should return to the cabin, he found a fallen trunk and sat down. As he did, a strange thing happened. 'Twas as though his vision shifted. For an instant he was not in the clearing full of orange and yellow foxes-and-cubs, but in a green, manicured garden with tidy rose bushes and a tall hedge.

Henry blinked and touched the bandage on his head gingerly. The garden was gone, and he was sitting once more in the clearing with Rosalind.

Then, a memory came, all in a rush.

'Your father, the Duke, shall arrive today,' a lady in a yellow silk gown said. Henry stood next to another woman, this one clad in a white apron over a grey dress. His governess, he recalled. Even at his young age, he perceived that she was anxious. What alarmed him even more was realizing that his mother, the Duchess of Kenling, was anxious as well.

The Duke had been gone for years. When he returned to the Kenling estate he marched into their lives like an invading army, asserting his authority over everything and everyone. The servants were terrified of him. His son soon became so, as well, which only contributed to the Duke's disdain for

the boy.

‘Coddled and pampered like one of the Queen’s dreadful little dogs!’ the Duke growled at Henry one afternoon. ‘Ruined, I daresay!’

Henry soon grew to understand that he would never win his father’s approval. The best he could hope for was to appease him in all matters over which he had any control. For the rest, he must avoid him.

‘Tell your man to pack up your things,’ the Duke said at dinner many years later. ‘We shall spend several weeks in the Corrach March.’

‘The Corrach March?’ Henry echoed, taken aback.

‘The Marquess of Corrach has invited us,’ the Duke said. ‘He has a daughter. You are to marry her.’

In Henry’s memory the images clouded and were replaced with the visage of a lovely young woman. Her plump lips were pink as rose petals. Her heavy curls of honey golden hair framed her large blue eyes. Lady Alfreda. She smirked at him, and his spirit bridled at the memory of her.

‘Oh, dear Henry, are you ill?’

Henry opened his eyes, only now realizing that he had closed them.

I am Henry Orson, the Earl of Linwood, and my father is the Duke of Kenling.

The knowledge drowned his joy like a lead weight on a fishing line.

I am the son of a duke.

'A spot of fatigue, that it all,' he told Rosalind, who gazed at him with concern.

If only I had remembered myself to be but the fourth or fifth son of baron, perhaps, or better yet, the son of a knight or baronet.

'Come, we should return to the cottage,' Rosalind said. She had discarded the flowers and helped him to his feet with both hands.

How can I tell her the truth?

Misery washed over him.

'Heavens, but you've lost all the color in your face,' Rosalind fretted. 'Pray forgive me, I have overtaxed you, and now you are unwell.'

Restored to his true self, Henry looked at her with new eyes. Her hair came out in untidy wisps about her face. She wore an apron, stained with streaks of grass and ash from the hearth, tied at the high waistline of her green and white gingham dress. The dress's hem was soiled from her passage through the forest paths. She was a lovely girl, but her hands were calloused with work. Her complexion betrayed the time she stayed out of doors. She had a simple beauty, that of a milkmaid or a farmer's daughter.

No! This is your wretched parents' thinking, not your own!

And yet how can I hope to marry Rosalind? We are from such very different lives.

I don't care! I shall take her as my wife, and damn the consequences.

But even as she helped him return to the cottage, he felt the doubts setting in.

Chapter 15

Henry

As he rested upon the bed, his hands folded quietly, Henry had deduced that Rosalind hid her visits to him from her family. She took her leave of him before noon, returning to her home, her pace rushed as though she feared she had been missed. When he kissed her goodbye, his heart ached.

Why hide his presence here from them, he wondered?

And why did she never tell him anything of her family?

She was hiding something from him, he was forced to conclude.

His memory continued to return throughout the solitary hours that followed, until he felt it to be quite complete. With this new breadth of knowledge, he was able to tease out an explanation: she was trespassing on the Marquess of Corrach's land. This cottage had belonged to a gamekeeper of one of the current marquess's ancestors. It was deep in the forest that covered much of his grounds.

'She hides her family from me for fear that when I return, I shall inform the marquess of their forays into his forest,' Henry murmured to himself.

A rustling noise caught his attention, and he turned slowly. A large tabby scowled at him from the shadows of the ruined side of the cabin.

'Aristotle,' he whispered.

She named the cats after Ancient Greeks. She is well-educated. Her accent is not local, but reminiscent of the gentry in London.

How did she come to reside on the border to Wales?

In poverty, from the looks of it.

There was more to her story, he surmised.

Her father was deceased, and she claimed that led to her change in circumstances, but it did not explain the move to this place. It did not account for her acquaintance with Oma Weiss, the wise woman. He had noticed that Oma treated Rosalind as a pupil.

Shouldn't she have sought a position as a governess or teacher?

'Twas the only proper thing for a gentleman's daughter to do when her family lost its fortune.

Puzzling over Rosalind's circumstances allowed Henry to avoid thinking about his own, but when Oma Weiss arrived in the late afternoon, he realized he had a problem.

'You are looking well, Henry,' the elderly lady said as she removed her bonnet and began fussing over him, checking his wounds.

She said she would move me to her own home if I had recovered enough, Henry recalled. *And that soon after, I should return to the Corrach estate.*

In a rush a horrid dread filled him. Leave this place?

Leave Rosalind?

The secret world they shared?

‘I do not feel well,’ he countered, panic making his heart hammer.

I am not ready. I need time to think. Time to sort everything out, before I face my parents again. My father.

‘No?’ Oma said, startled. Her eyebrows arched high. Her firm thumb prodded the edges of the healing gash that marred his forehead. ‘And yet your wound knits together well, ja?’

‘My head spins. I tried to walk with Rosalind, and grew too faint,’ he said. ‘She shall tell you the same.’

The defensive tone in his voice made him cringe inwardly. His father would have berated him for it, and Oma herself peered at him with surprise and suspicion.

‘*Ich hab jetzt echt de Nase voll*,’ the woman muttered. ‘Well. I suppose we must wait another day or two to move you, ja? ’Tis bad to jar the head if you are still weak.’

Henry replied with a small, silent nod.

I just need a bit of time. Just a bit more time.

Rosalind took up the plates from dinner, carrying them into the kitchen to be washed. At the table, Bertie sat with Mama.

‘Is that all there is?’ he called after his sister.

Rosalind set down the plates and returned to the main room. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I said, “Is that all there is?” For dinner. Leek soup?’ Bertie said. ‘There wasn’t even a bit of bacon in it!’

‘No bread, either,’ Mama remarked, her wide eyes blinking as though she was surprised.

As well she might be. Rosalind had fallen behind in her duties, spending so much time with Henry. She had baked no bread for days, and made no trades with the nearby farms for bacon or other fare. She flushed, vexed and discomfited.

‘’Tis all we have,’ she said briskly. ‘I shall see to trading for bacon tomorrow.’

‘If you’d leave my traps alone we might have had a hare or a pheasant for dinner one night,’ Bertie complained.

‘Dash it all, Bertie, you know poaching is a terrible risk!’ Rosalind said.

‘We shall all starve to death, then?’ her brother replied.

‘Perhaps you might consider finding other ways to provide for the family!’ Rosalind snapped.

Bertie’s mouth dropped open.

Mama’s blinking accelerated.

‘If it wasn’t always my responsibility to do *everything*,’ Rosalind railed, ‘we might have more food and—and things. *You* could go to the Jones farm to trade our goat cheese for a pound of bacon, you know!’

Bertie stared.

‘*You* could milk Snowdrop, and muck out her stall! *You* could gather blackberries and trade the Joneses for sugar to cook preserves—why, they might *pay* you in sugar and bacon if you helped around their farm!’

‘Me, a *farmhand*?’ Bertie erupted, shaken at last from his shock.

‘And what am *I*, but a maid-of-all-work, save for the fact I’ve never a day of rest?’ Rosalind demanded, her outrage only growing as the words spilled forth. ‘And why must *I* trade my dreams for a profession, all to support you and Mama?’

Bertie began sputtering incoherently and Mrs. Read began to cry.

‘Profession?’ she sniffled. ‘What can she mean by profession?’

Now shame and guilt mingled with fury in Rosalind’s heart, followed by fear. She had lost all control of herself. She had veritably *shouted* at her brother, of matters she had shielded her mother from for years.

‘There, there, now, Mama,’ she said, her hands shaking as she gently helped the lady to rise. ‘Let me see you to bed.’

Her mother went along meekly, too distressed to ask questions or argue. Rosalind helped her change into her night things and tucked her in, then marched out of the bedchamber, determined to leave the house and go to Henry at once.

Bertie stood like a wall between her and the door.

‘You’ve met some young bounder haven’t you,’ he accused. ‘Some yeoman’s son, I daresay! Have you dishonored yourself, Rosalind? Tell me the truth!’

His guess was so mistaken and yet so insightful all at once that she burst out with a laugh. There was little humour in it, however.

‘Haven’t you been listening?’ she demanded. ‘I haven’t the time for secret assignations. I’m all taken up with doing everything around this house!’

‘Balderdash. You’ve been behaving strangely for the last fortnight! ’Tis a beau, confess it!’

Lying did not come naturally to Rosalind, and she felt deeply uneasy. She knew she could not reveal the truth to Bertie, but here he was, demanding an answer.

‘You may tell yourself what faradiddles you like, Gilbert Read!’ she cried. ‘It shan’t change the truth, which is that you are a lay-about who contributes nothing to our lives but risk and worry!’

Bertie recoiled, stung. Rosalind burst into tears and hastened to shut

herself up in her little room, slamming the door behind her.

There would be no leaving the house tonight. No going to Henry, and burying herself in his arms, as she yearned to do. And she feared deeply that when Henry left for Corrach—no doubt very soon—that would be the end of the dream they shared.

What on earth has come over me, to accuse Bertie that way?

For years Eira had criticized her brother, and Rosalind had defended him. With sincerity, in fact. Yet now, she blamed him just as Eira once did. What had changed?

'Tis Henry. 'Tis my longing to marry Henry.

I know I cannot have him. I cannot have the future he offers me, because of my duty to Bertie and Mama.

And I hate Bertie for it.

If Bertie were to accept our circumstances instead of moping and acting foolishly, setting traps when honest work would give us what we need without such risk—if I could rely on him to care for Mama—

But Bertie was a gentleman, and a life of farmwork was unthinkable to him.

And yet 'tis not unthinkable to him that I become a midwife to support him and Mama both!

Rosalind was forced, for the first time, to own that Bertie did in fact act very selfishly. That he had been raised to think himself above manual labour was certain, but she had been raised the same way. One of them had accepted their change in circumstances and the

consequence to their expectations of life. She was older, and perhaps that played a part. But Bertie was an adult. He was the man of the household. His refusal to accept the realities of their situation was selfish and irresponsible.

I have known it all along.

The possibility that Bertie had more responsibility in the tragedy that brought them here than she had hitherto considered tugged at her as well, but she could not allow herself to pursue that thought. 'Twas too dreadful to think of that time, four years ago, and the choice she had made, and the disaster that had followed.

Sitting on her bed, her knees drawn up and wrapped in her arms, Rosalind wept quietly, unwilling for her mother to overhear. She wiped at the tears, but still they came, and she knew she would sleep poorly that night.

Chapter 16

The following morning a carriage arrived. Alfreda had lately risen, and saw it through the window of her bedchamber. She recognized it at once. The Mirklewick crest adorned the door on either side, after all.

‘Arabella,’ she breathed, her heart tightening.

She rang at once for Joubert, her lady’s maid, and dressed in haste, although this was greatly slowed by her indecision as to her toilette.

‘The rose silk,’ she said at first.

‘My lady might find it unsuitable to the morning,’ Joubert pointed out.

‘Very well, the muslin with the green embroidered sash,’ Alfreda said. ‘But no, that will not do! Arabella shall say I still dress like a girl.’

Alfreda sucked on her lower lip as Joubert waited.

After a moment Alfreda said, ‘The yellow walking dress.’

‘My lady has complained of it rendering her complexion sallow.’

‘Oh perdition, Joubert. What do you recommend?’

‘Perhaps the navy and grey?’

‘Too staid! Oh, whatever shall I do? I’ve nothing to wear.’

By the time she descended, wearing a periwinkle blue spencer over a white morning dress with long sleeves, Arabella and her husband, the Duke of Mirklewick, had settled themselves in the yellow parlour, and Mama was fussing over them. Someone had brought tea, and Arabella was sipping in her usual dramatic fashion.

‘The roads, Mama, the roads,’ she moaned.

‘Piffle,’ grunted Mirklewick. ‘The roads were perfectly agreeable.’

‘And he *insisted* we leave at *dawn* from the inn, Mama, and you should have seen the beds! And the tea, the color of lemon juice. Oh, ’twas horrid.’

‘Oh, how dreadful,’ Mama exclaimed in sympathy.

Alfreda entered, forcing a smile. ‘Dear sister! What a grand surprise.’

‘Alfreda! My heavens, you look quite grown. Like a very mature lady indeed,’ Arabella responded at once. The veiled insult was not lost on Alfreda: she was aging and unmarried. Soon to be a maiden aunt, if some miracle did not take place.

‘Where are little George and Martha?’ Alfreda asked after Arabella’s children.

‘Oh, we left them with the governess of course,’ Arabella said dismissively. ‘I cannot abide traveling in a carriage with children.’

‘Surely such a journey is unpleasant under any circumstances,’ Alfreda said with false sympathy. She felt the urge to pace and suppressed it, standing demurely instead as Mirklewick sipped his tea, his eyes

moving from his wife to her sister as though he watched a match of tennis. ‘I do wonder at your making it at all.’

‘Oh, my goodness, Alfie,’ Arabella said, using the pet name Alfreda detested more than anything in the world, ‘when I heard of your troubles I felt I must come at once! Augusta would come as well, you understand, were it possible. But as the only sister left in England I had to be the one to make the journey!’

‘Oh, Arabella, how thoughtful of you,’ gushed Mama.

‘How did you hear of my troubles?’ Alfreda managed, though her teeth would clench.

‘Why, Mama wrote to me, of course,’ Arabella said. ‘That Lord Linwood—do you *really* think he wanted to marry you? What a shame he vanished!’

Alfreda’s cheeks warmed, and she forced a smile, then cocked her head to the side in a pose she knew gave her an air of vulnerability. ‘I am most distressed at his disappearance, Arabella. We are very much in love.’

‘Well, what on earth can have happened to him? It seems dreadfully light of him to disappear like that.’

‘Light of him? Arabella, in all likelihood he has been injured or worse!’ Alfreda exclaimed.

‘Still, you must own ’tis most troubling for a man to vanish into the forest for days at a time. I declare, you have been spared a bad match, Alfie.’

‘Mama, pray tell Arabella she is being most ungenerous to Lord Linwood,’ Alfreda protested.

‘One can certainly understand why you might feel an attachment, of course,’ Arabella continued without a pause. ‘Having no other prospects, as is your misfortune, dear Alfie. But nevertheless a bad match is worse than no march at all, though it may not seem that way to you now.’

Alfreda’s cheeks had gone from warm to hot, and her hands curled into unladylike fists at her sides.

‘’Tis true that Lord Linwood always did have a distracted air about him,’ mused Mama.

‘Oh!’ Alfreda exclaimed in vexation. Arabella’s pleased smile only provoked her all the more. ‘Pray forgive me, I simply must have a breath of air!’

With that she turned to leave.

‘Never fear, Alfie, I shall join you next time you wish to take a turn about the garden,’ Arabella said to her back. ‘We have so much to discuss.’

With a grimace, Alfreda fled.

For her part that morning, Rosalind prepared the breakfast meal wordlessly for her mother and brother. She fed the chickens and the goat, and cleaned the house, whilst Bertie watched her, sitting at the table. Her fury towards him had not abated; indeed it only grew, but she also felt trapped by his presence. He was sure to follow her today. Henry would be wondering where she was, she knew. With each passing moment, her distress increased.

At last it was mid-morning, and she could bear it no longer. She set out into the woods, and sure enough, as she peered out through the brambles, she saw the door of the house open and Bertie come outside.

‘Very well, then, Bertie,’ she muttered. ‘If you shall follow me, I shall lead you.’

Rosalind took the shortest path she knew to the Weiss cottage.

Oma raised her eyebrows when she let Rosalind inside, and Eira hastened to her side.

‘What’s the matter?’ Eira asked without preamble. ‘Is Henry unwell?’

Rosalind glanced toward the window. ‘’Tis Bertie. He has convinced myself I am having secret meetings with a farmer’s son.’

Eira’s eyes widened and then she let out a laugh. ‘And he dislikes that idea, I suppose? Heaven forbid you should have a beau, and a bit of happiness.’

‘He thinks I shall dishonor myself,’ Rosalind said, smiling although she found no humour in the situation. ‘Oh, Eira, I haven’t been to see Henry at all yet. He shall be worried about me, and hungry, as well.’

Oma made a short grunting noise. ‘*Nun schlägt’s aber dreizehn*.’

Eira’s gaze flicked over to her.

‘What did she say?’ Rosalind whispered.

‘She’s impatient,’ Eira replied. ‘But I am not certain exactly what troubles her.’

Oma had begun packing a basket. Eira hastened to assist her. Oma put apples and a half of a loaf of bread in it, as well as some of her medicines.

‘Come along, girls,’ she said briskly. ‘We shall see to our patient now.’

Rosalind felt a sharp pang of anxiety, but she needn’t have. As they exited the Weiss cottage they met Bertie on the path. The young man was startled to see them, and paled.

‘Good morning, Mr. Read,’ Oma said in her abrupt way.

‘Oh, I say, good morning,’ stammered Bertie. He gave the ladies each a quick bow and then fled.

‘*So ein Angsthase*,’ Oma muttered, clicking her tongue.

Eira smiled at Rosalind. ‘She called him a fear-rabbit.’

For the first time that morning, Rosalind smiled. 'Twas a relief to know Oma had chased Bertie away, even if she still felt greatly distressed by all that had happened these last days.

The three ladies soon reached the gamekeeper's cabin. Rosalind's heart lifted in anticipation of seeing Henry. She was not disappointed; he was sitting up in bed, a cat curled on his lap.

When he looked up, he brought a finger to his lips. For an instant the tableau held; then the cat heard or scented the presence of the visitors and darted away like a streaking shadow.

'Aristotle?' Rosalind asked with a smile.

'Hippolyta, unless I am mistaken,' Henry replied.

'Ah,' Rosalind said, a blooming of joy filling her heart.

How I adore him, she thought with wonder.

Eira set about tending the fire, and Oma examined Henry's head, whilst Rosalind prepared his plate.

'You slept well, ja?' Oma asked.

'Indeed,' Henry said, though his eyes followed Rosalind. 'You are late this morning, and I did not imagine I should have the good fortune of a visit from all three of you.'

Oma snorted.

'Pray forgive me,' Rosalind said to him. 'I should have liked to come sooner, but I was...delayed.'

‘These wounds heal well,’ Oma declared. ‘We shall move you today.’

Rosalind looked at Henry in alarm, and saw a similar emotion reflected in his eyes.

‘I—I fear I cannot be moved,’ he said. ‘The dizziness—’

‘Nonsense,’ Oma said. ‘You are nearly recovered.’

‘But yesterday I grew ill—’

‘’Tis true,’ Rosalind put in. ‘He was faint!’

‘*Quatsch!*’ Oma said. ‘Henry shall make the trip without difficulty. And I shall inform the marquess of his whereabouts by evening.’

‘Oma…’ Eira murmured in dismay, her eyes flicking from Henry to Rosalind and back.

‘I beg you, Oma, we mustn’t risk it,’ Rosalind said, her heart pounding. ‘You have told me many times, one mustn’t jar an injured head!’

‘Indeed, I am too befuddled to see the marquess so soon!’ Henry said.

‘Fear not,’ Oma said. ‘The marquess shall call his physician to assist you in the rest of your recovery, Henry. You shall have the best care.’

‘No, I do not wish to return,’ Henry gasped.

Rosalind looked at him then, for something in his voice alerted her—she knew not to what; but her agitation worsened.

‘Oma, really,’ Eira said.

‘You were the guest of the marquess,’ Oma said serenely. ‘Why hesitate to return to him? Think how relieved he shall be to know you are alive and well.’

‘I—’ Henry began, and cut himself off.

‘All of those in his estate shall be most pleased as well,’ Oma persisted. ‘You shall be welcomed back with open arms.’

‘I shan’t!’ Henry burst out.

Everyone looked at him.

‘Why would you say that, Henry?’ Rosalind asked, her heart racing.

‘I—I—’

‘You have recovered your memories, ja?’ Oma said knowingly.

Rosalind stared at Henry in shock.

He lowered his eyes, confirming that it was true.

Her heart dropped. ‘Henry, has Oma the right of it? You remember your past?’

Henry's large fingers fiddled with the blanket on which he sat. 'I do.'

Rosalind covered her mouth with her hand. *When? When had he remembered? And why had he not told her?*

'I—I cannot explain it, but I do not wish to return to the marquess's estate,' he muttered.

'Why not?' Eira asked, when Rosalind remained silent.

'I despise it there,' Henry said, his voice sincere.

'You know who you are?' Rosalind breathed.

He met her eyes then. 'Yes. I am Henry Orson, the Earl of Linwood. My father is the Duke of Kenling.'

Rosalind stumbled back as if struck.

Duke?

Henry was heir to a dukedom?

Tears filled her eyes as despair crushed her heart. She turned away, covering her face.

Behind her she heard Henry rise. His hands rested on her shoulders.

'This changes nothing,' he said in her ear. 'Pray, my love, you must believe me.'

She could not look at him. She could not speak.

This changes everything.

A duke.

A duke's son cannot marry a penniless, common girl like me.

'Iesu mawr!'

Startled, Rosalind looked up.

The door of the cottage was open, and a man she did not know stood there, his face showing surprise and happiness.

'*Nefoedd wen*,' the man said. 'I thought I'd never find you, Lord Linwood! Oh the Lady Alfreda, she'll be so pleased.'

The Lady Alfreda?

Hell and damnation.

Rosalind looked at Henry, who was staring at the man with an expression of misery in his eyes.

Then he turned to Rosalind, taking her arms in his hands and drawing her close, he leaned in and whispered to her, 'There is no hiding from the truth now, dearest. I must return, if only to set my affairs in order. But tell me, I beg you—tell me you shall still be mine.'

Rosalind's voice was caught in her throat, making a large lump that ached horridly.

‘Please, dear Rosalind,’ Henry begged. ‘Please say you forgive me for waiting to tell you—please say that nothing has changed! Tell me we are still betrothed.’

He is mad, she thought, and began to cry.

‘His Grace the Duke shall be glad to see you are well, my lord, and her Grace as well, I’ve no doubt,’ prattled the man.

‘Rosalind,’ Henry murmured. ‘Rosalind, pray, tell me you still consent to be my wife.’

Her tears came harder, and she shook her head. ‘I cannot answer you, my lord,’ she managed.

Henry made a noise of pain, as though she had struck him. He released her, and stepped away.

Eira rushed to her then, and she buried her face in her friend’s shoulder. She could not watch Henry leave.

When she finally lifted her eyes, he was gone.

Chapter 17

Henry followed Padrig, the gardener, through the forest, heading north. The latter had introduced himself and scarcely stopped talking long enough to draw a breath.

'Fancy finding you in the old gamekeeper's place, my lord,' Padrig was saying. 'I'd never have thought it. 'Twas mere desperation to look for you there. I'd nowhere left to look, truth be told, and I was loathe to return to the Lady Alfreda 'thout something to offer her, like.'

The sky, reflecting Henry's mood, clouded dark grey, and a thin drizzle misted the air. His feet felt heavy and fatigue hung about him like a yoke. He'd never wished to sleep more in all his days.

To sleep, perchance to dream...

Indeed, he knew the weariness for what it was: no true exhaustion, but a desperate desire to escape the fate that awaited him. Every step weighed more than the last, because every step took him farther from Rosalind, and closer to the people he had yearned to escape long before he fell and injured himself.

'Was you there the whole time, then, my lord?' Padrig asked, but did not pause for a response. 'Imagine that. We was all out of ideas, you know, for we searched and searched. Her Grace took ill, so afeard she was for you, and the Lady Alfreda—a determined lady, that one, she'd not allow that you were lost.'

Lady Alfreda, determined to find him? Had he been less dreary, he might have felt surprise. Evidently she would be pleased at his return. The thought of seeing Lady Alfreda, of having to respond to her enthusiasm at seeing him, made him almost lose the will to press on.

‘And who was them ladies, my lord? Did they tend to you? You’ll forgive my saying so, but I noticed the injuries on your head. ’Tis why you never came back, innit?’

When Padrig raised the question of the identity of the ladies, a sense of alarm stirred within Henry. He had surmised that Rosalind, Oma, and Miss Weiss must be trespassing when they entered the forest near the gamekeeper’s cottage. The boundary of Lord Corrach’s estate was marked by a wall; there could be no mistake. Should Padrig tell the marquess about the ladies, in all likelihood Corrach would realize they were trespassing. Would the marquess care?

He very well might. In Henry’s experience, wealthy landowners could be surprisingly petty about such things.

‘Padrig,’ he said, interrupting the flow of the man’s constant yammering.

‘Yes, my lord?’

Henry frowned, uncertain how to approach the request he wished to make.

‘Padrig, I have a concern,’ he said after a moment.

‘A concern, my lord?’

Henry stopped walking. ‘Indeed.’

He peered at the man, attempting to ascertain whether he was the sort to be trusted with a secret. If Henry asked him to lie, would he do it, or would he hastened to go tell Lord Corrach?

‘Have you ever desired to be head gardener, Padrig?’ Henry asked at last.

Padrig pulled off his tweed hat and began kneading it between both hands. ‘Head gardener, m-my lord?’ he said, his voice faltering.

Henry took this reaction to mean he did indeed yearn for such a position very much.

‘Yes,’ Henry said. ‘I’ve a need for a new head gardener at Linwood. ’Tis one of our smaller family properties. I’ve a mind to reside there.’

The gardens at Linwood had been largely neglected since Henry was a child, and he thought he would indeed like to see someone come in and set them to rights. This trade would benefit him in more ways than one, and reward Padrig, if he showed Henry loyalty.

‘Oh, is that right, my lord? A head gardener? At Linwood, you say?’

‘Just so.’

‘Linwood, that’s in the north, innit, my lord?’

‘Near Hornsea Mere, in fact.’

‘I’ve never traveled so far, like,’ Padrig mused.

‘And would you be averse to such a move?’

Henry peered at Padrig, watching the man as he raised his eyebrows. ‘Oh, no, my lord. To be head gardener of a great estate I should happily go to the moon.’

Henry smiled. ‘Very well, then. I should like to reward you for finding me, Padrig, and I since I have need of a gardener, one who is ready to restore the grounds of Linwood, you understand—there shall be a good deal of work to do—’

‘*Iesu mawr*!’ Padrig exclaimed, beaming. ‘I can’t think of anything better!’

‘Capital,’ Henry said, cheered a little by Padrig’s evident delight. ‘’Tis settled. When I leave for Linwood, you shall come with me.’

Padrig began to chat happily again, and Henry paid him little mind. He pretended to listen, nodding and grunting once in a while, as they resumed walking back to the manor. When they came to the edge of the treeline, Henry halted again.

‘Padrig,’ Henry said.

‘Yes, my lord?’

‘I should like to tell Lord Corrach and everyone else the tale of my misadventures,’ Henry said.

‘Of course, my lord.’

‘And I should prefer not to learn that you have been talking about it with anyone,’ Henry said. ‘The situation was…delicate. I was very unwell, and I shan’t be pleased to hear rumours spread concerning what happened.’

A canny look came into Padrig’s eyes, and Henry saw that he had underestimated the fellow’s intelligence.

‘And perhaps the presence of a lovely young lady might be best kept quiet, like, my lord?’ Padrig said.

He thinks I had some sort of dalliance with Rosalind, Henry realized. *He thinks I stayed away to enjoy myself with her.*

’Twas close enough to the truth to make Henry deeply uncomfortable, and he might have argued or reprimanded the man, save for the still-present need to prevent the marquess from learning of Rosalind’s trespassing.

‘Indeed, Padrig, I should like to avoid mentioning the presence of any of the ladies you saw,’ Henry said.

‘Consider my lips sealed, my lord,’ Padrig said cheerfully.

Henry gave him a nod. Relief at having avoided one misfortune was a welcome sensation.

He turned and looked out of the trees, gazing across the green, at Corrach Manor.

Now, it was time to face the rest.

‘We need a spot of music, I daresay,’ Alfreda’s sister, Arabella, declared that afternoon in the drawing room. The weather precluded going out of doors.

‘What a capital idea!’ exclaimed young Lord Frye, who evidently thought everything Arabella said was wonderful. He sat in the armchair closest to the sofa on which Arabella was settled. Alfreda shared another sofa with Lady Wyndham, who was dozing, her embroidery soon to tumble from her loose grip.

‘You should play a piece, Alfie,’ Arabella said, smirking.

Alfreda narrowly prevented herself from scowling at her sister. ‘I defer to your greater skill, Arabella.’

‘Hm,’ Arabella responded, raising her eyebrows.

‘Oh, yes, do play for us, Duchess,’ Frye said.

With a pleased expression, Arabella stood. ‘I declare, Alfie, perhaps if you had practiced as much as I,’ she said as she sat at the pianoforte, ‘you might have become a more accomplished musician.’

‘That is no doubt very true,’ Alfreda said, managing not to clench her teeth.

‘High-born lords always like an accomplished lady,’ her sister said primly.

‘Who may argue with that?’ Alfreda said, standing. ‘Pray, Lady Clara, take a turn around the room with me, if you please.’

Lady Clara, who had been intent upon her sewing, looked up, startled. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Alfreda arched her eyebrows at the silly lady. ‘A turn, Lady Clara. We shan’t walk outside in *that*.’ She indicated the fog outside the window.

‘Oh! Indeed not,’ Lady Clara said with a bemused smile. ‘Very well.’

Pointedly ignoring her sister, Alfreda took Lady Clara’s arm and guided her to walk around the drawing room, hoping thus to avoid Arabella’s veiled barbs. They had finished the first turn when they again neared the first of the windows. Alfreda frowned as she spied two figures crossing the wide expanse of grass between this side of the manor and the southern forest. She paused, blinking—the day was grey and misty and lent nothing to visibility.

Lady Clara was surprised at Alfreda’s hesitation, and peered out of the window as well.

‘Why, can it be?’ Lady Clara murmured.

Alfreda’s eyes widened. ‘I—I believe—oh, heavens!’

That gardener has done it at last!

‘It is!’ Alfreda cried, her fingertips pressing her cheeks. ‘Oh, heavens! ’Tis he! Truly, ’tis Linwood himself!’

‘Linwood?’ Lady Harriet echoed, standing from the sofa where she had been intent on her embroidery.

‘Can it be the famous missing Lord Linwood, truly?’ Arabella asked.

Everyone stood, then, crowding to the window to see.

‘By Jove, it *is* Linwood!’ Lord Wyndham blustered. ‘I say, Corrach, send out some footmen to assist in bringing him in!’

‘He seems to be moving perfectly well under his own power,’ Tolbert remarked, but no one was listening to him, and Alfreda’s father began bellowing for the butler.

‘Mr. Parry! Mr. Parry!’

‘We must inform her Grace the Duchess this instant!’ Alfreda’s mother exclaimed. Alfreda glanced at the Duke, but he was standing motionless by the hearth, his face blank.

‘I knew it,’ Lady Harriet cried. ‘Did I not say, Clara? Tell them, Clara, tell them. I said it just this morning, did I not? I felt it in my bones, today would be a good day!’

‘Indeed you did!’ Clara confirmed.

‘I say, Dedrick, you owe me fifty pounds,’ said Lord Frye. ‘A fortnight, I said, did I not?’

‘You’re befogged, Frye,’ put in Tolbert. ‘’Twas I who wagered a fortnight. You said one week.’

‘Mr. Parry!’ Lord Corrach shouted. ‘I say, Parry!’

Between the excitement and the push of bodies against her as

everyone vied to look out the window, Alfreda felt genuinely faint.

'I am here, Lord Corrach,' Mr. Parry said from the doorway.

'Took you long enough!' snapped the marquess. 'We need men out on the green! At once! Someone's bringing Linwood home!'

Alfreda gasped and swayed, stars popping before her eyes.

'Oh! Lady Alfreda!' Lady Wyndham cried.

Several hands grabbed Alfreda's arms and she was led to a chair, where she sat and rested her forehead on her palm.

'Oh, Alfie, *really*,' said Arabella.

''Tis the shock!' Lady Harriet declared.

'The poor dear,' Lady Wyndham said.

'Someone fetch a glass of claret!' Lady Clara said.

'My dear, you must not take on so,' Alfreda's mother said, not unkindly. 'You told me yourself you were certain he would return.'

'Such devotion is very becoming,' Lady Wyndham remarked.

Under normal circumstances, Alfreda might have relished all of the fuss, but she felt genuinely ill. How she had fretted over this! How she had feared he might never return! And now he was back, at last. And at last, she would have her wedding!

Nothing could stand in her way.

Chapter 18

‘Where *were* you?’

Henry stood in the center of the small library—one of several in the vast manor—with his hands clasped behind his back, facing his father. The latter stood opposite him. His mother, dressed in grey silk, had taken a chair, too overcome with emotion to remain on her feet. The question was the Duke’s, but ’twas plain that his mother required the answer just as well.

‘Some farmhouse,’ Henry said, his fingers knotting themselves together behind him. ‘Not far from here, I gather, but I was insensible most of the time, and I wandered from it in the night and became lost.’

‘You were confused?’ his mother asked, her face pale, a handkerchief clutched near her mouth.

‘Oh yes,’ Henry said.

‘We must send for the physician at once, Kenling.’

‘Hogwash, the boy is fit as a fiddle,’ his father snapped.

‘But Kenling—’

‘I don’t believe for a moment that he lay insensible for a fortnight!’ the Duke said. He stood straight and stiff as a board, glaring at Henry. It took all of Henry’s will not to cast his eyes away from his father’s. ‘What fudge. He happened to wander off? And no one noticed? So he mightn’t tell us who aided him? Fudge, I say!’

Henry felt his ears grow hot. His father always saw through his schemes, but this time too much was at stake.

'You may believe what you like, Your Grace,' Henry said through his teeth. 'The fact remains that I do not remember enough of the last two weeks to tell you who came to my rescue. I should like to thank them, if I could, but I do not know who they are.'

'Hogwash,' the Duke said again, but this time he paced a bit, which Henry knew for a sure sign the Duke was losing momentum.

'Oh, Kenling, we simply must have the physician examine him!' the Duchess said. 'Look at the wounds on his brow! They cut into his scalp, by heaven.'

The Duke snorted. Henry imagined his father should have liked to be able to dismiss the wounds as well, if only he could, but 'twas plain to see they were real enough.

'Corrach has already sent for the physician,' the Duke conceded. 'So you may stop all the fuss.'

'Oh,' said Henry's mother, and she slumped uncharacteristically against the back of the chair, the silk of her gown whispering in a reproachful tone.

Henry felt a pang of shame. He had wanted never to return, but 'twas evident that his mother had suffered greatly due to his disappearance.

'I daresay the fellow shall declare Henry to be quite hale,' the Duke said. 'And once he has, we shall hold a ball to announce Henry's engagement to Corrach's daughter.'

‘I beg your pardon?’ Henry breathed.

Corrach’s daughter? Lady Alfreda?

‘’Tis already being arranged,’ the Duke said in clipped tones. ‘I spoke with Lord and Lady Corrach on the matter and they were more than willing to oblige me.’

A ball? To celebrate my engagement to Lady Alfreda?

’Tis out of the question.

No matter what else happens, I shan’t marry her.

Henry frowned. ‘Your Grace, a ball would be—’

‘Just the thing!’ cried his mother, some colour returning to her cheeks. ‘Everyone will be delighted to celebrate your miraculous return, Henry.’

Taken aback by the change in his mother’s demeanor, Henry hesitated. But ’twas simply out of the question. ‘Pray forgive me, but I cannot agree to such an idea.’

‘What rot,’ the Duke snapped. ‘As if you have anything to say on the matter. It has all been decided, and preparations are underway. There *shall* be a ball.’

Henry felt quite paralyzed. He knew not what to do. He had never outright refused to follow his father's orders, instead finding subtle ways to resist and circumvent them. But this? How could he stop this from happening?

‘We have waited long enough,’ declared his father. ‘It seems one must take matters into one’s own hands, even when one’s son should be the one doing the courting and the proposing. Thus I shall remedy our situation. You should thank me, Linwood. It shall be most diverting: a ball, in two nights’ time.’

Rosalind folded Mama's clean clothes, pausing as she packed them in one of the large trunks they had brought with them from London. Her mind was hopelessly scattered. Even as she moved from a bedchamber to the parlour, she forgot why.

That Welshman found Henry in the gamekeeper's cottage and took him back to the Corrach estate. The marquess shall learn soon enough of people trespassing on his grounds.

Rosalind gave herself a brief shake and returned to her mother's room, then found the folded shawls belonging to her, stacked on a high shelf in the large, aging wardrobe. Then she paused again.

But if I stay out of the forest, and Oma and Eira do so as well, surely there is little risk. The marquess shall lose interest soon enough. Surely there is no need to flee.

Rosalind pressed her lips together, touching the shawls without bringing them down.

Bertie is in danger because of your folly, Rosalind. Why did you not find a way to inform the marquess of Henry's whereabouts a fortnight ago?

How could I have done? Henry could not be moved from the cottage. If I had revealed his location, whomever I spoke to would have known I had trespassed.

These recriminations and protests were useless and a waste of energy.

Rosalind pulled down the shawls and packed them.

If only we might leave temporarily, and return in a month or the like. Then the danger would certainly be past.

But we have no money for a holiday elsewhere.

Indeed, we have no money to flee for good, either.

Rosalind bit her lip as she contemplated the bedclothes, worn and dreary. There would be no use in attempting to sell most of their things. Only the goat and chickens might fetch something, but even then...

Rosalind sat on the bed heavily.

It is useless.

We cannot leave.

She buried her face in her hands.

'Why, Rosie, whatever is the matter?'

Mama stood in the doorway. Rosalind had left her dosing in the parlour, but it seemed she had awoken.

Mama's eyes traveled from the trunk to the wardrobe, both still open. 'What are you doing?' she asked. Then her face brightened. 'Has the time come, at last, to return to Town?'

A sense of wild unhappiness seized Rosalind. 'No, Mama, we shan't be leaving.'

‘Oh,’ her mother said. She wiped a hand over her face fretfully. ‘How my head aches so.’

Mustering her will, Rosalind stood and helped her mother to bed.

If only, Rosalind thought with bitterness, *I might have taken a position somewhere as a governess. I might have avoided all of this!*

Such a future had never been possible, however, for she could not leave this house. Who would care for Mama? For Bertie, as well?

’Twas for this reason she had apprenticed herself to Oma. The life of a midwife would allow her to remain living here, whilst earning enough for their needs.

She tucked her mother in and exited to the parlour, uncertain of what to do.

Unbidden, Henry’s face came to mind. His golden eyes met hers tenderly.

Oh, Henry, how I should have loved to be your wife!

How appalled Bertie would be if he knew she was in love with a nobleman. Well, he need not worry, for that future was far outside her reach.

Everything was ruined. If her misfortunes continued, the marquess would learn of her trespassing, and soon after, of Bertie’s poaching, and once they both were arrested, the whole story of Bertie’s activities would come to light.

Rosalind closed her eyes. She could see, against her will, a gibbet, and Bertie standing at a noose.

Perhaps if only I should disappear for a time…?

Oh, of course. And I suppose you would run off with Henry?

No. I am certain he shall forget me now.

This thought made her heart sink further. 'Twas only to be expected. He had liked her, she knew, but why not? He remembered no one else, and she had cared for him in his illness.

Eira did so as well, and he did not propose marriage to her.

Rosalind made her way to the kitchen. She might as well start a loaf of bread, and perhaps give the pots a wash, whilst she was at it.

Henry may have liked me enough to propose, but he was not in his right mind! Look at me, kneading dough. A Duke may not marry a girl who bakes her own bread!

He is not the duke yet…

Oh, Rosalind! Be sensible! Duke of Kenling or Earl of Linwood, the marriage is impossible.

Although she knew this to be true, her heart would not stop pining for Henry, no matter how she chastised herself.

This is insufferable. How long shall I feel this dreadful ache? This longing for his touch?

Her wet hands rested on the edge of the pot and she gazed unseeing out of the kitchen window.

'Tis my lot to be unhappy, after all. And 'tis only what I deserve.

With this thought, she found it easier to turn her attention back to the present, despite her heartbreak. 'Twas all hopeless, but that was only to be expected. Her only task, in the end, was to bear it.

Chapter 19

Corrach's physician, Dr. Wallis, was a middle-aged man with a bald head and overgrown, greying eyebrows. He examined Henry from head to toe, dwelling, unsurprisingly, on the former.

'Two wounds,' the gentleman muttered as he parted Henry's hair with diligent interest.

Henry grit his teeth and endeavored to remain still, although every muscle in his body strained to leap up and run from the room, the manor, the estate.

'Her Grace, the Duchess, expressed a great deal of concern about your memory,' Dr. Wallis said, peering at Henry through his spectacles. 'She maintains that you have large gaps, my lord.'

'Indeed,' Henry confirmed.

'And is it true that you were abed for almost a fortnight?'

Had his father tasked the physician with ascertaining if Henry was lying?

'I was,' he said.

'Hm,' Wallis murmured, prodding Henry's bicep. 'Yes, a mild softening of the muscle...'

Henry closed his eyes, the experience of the physician's examination becoming more detestable by the minute.

‘Her Grace also mentioned that you wandered, my lord? You became lost?’

Henry blinked his eyes open and tried to focus on the man. ‘Yes. I wandered from my bed. Out of the farmhouse, in fact. I was…confused.’

The older man shook his head, clicking his tongue, and Henry feared he did not believe him. However, Wallis said, ‘This is most concerning. Such a head injury… Hydrocephalus may have ensued. Any dizziness now? Blurred vision?’

‘At times,’ Henry said with a sense of relief. The last thing he needed was for the physician to confirm his father’s suspicions.

‘You must not agitate yourself at such moments. Any spots in your vision, any doubling of the vision, headache, nausea…you must sit quietly in a darkened room until it has passed completely,’ Wallis admonished him.

Henry nodded, feeling glad that the examination was coming to an end, when the fellow began once more to prod the scars in his scalp.

‘I am amazed at such cleanly healed wounds, however,’ Wallis declared. ‘All the more so given your complications, my lord. You cannot have had a fever, for these wounds were never infected.’

Oma Weiss knows her craft.

‘I can only suppose that the farmer and his wife applied some knowledge of healing to my injuries,’ Henry said.

‘Yes, yes,’ Wallis said, nodding. ‘No doubt they must. And such skill is not universal, I daresay! You might find out who they were based on that alone.’

‘A capital idea,’ Henry said, hiding his uneasiness. ‘I shall have to ride out and ask those I cross whether they know of a farmer with some knowledge of healing.’

‘Oh, merciful heavens, no,’ Wallis said, surprising him. ‘I forbid you to ride.’

‘You can’t mean it,’ Henry said, his heart sinking.

‘I most certainly do,’ Wallis asserted. ‘Another fall would likely end in death, my lord. And the jostling alone…’tis to be avoided at all costs.’

‘For how long?’

‘Indefinitely! Why, I shall tell your parents I believe you should not even ride in a carriage for at least a month. You shall have to remain here, my lord, although from what I saw of Lady Alfreda, that shan’t be too great a hardship,’ Wallis said with a smile.

‘Yes,’ Henry said faintly.

No riding. How could he bear it? Trapped in this house, with no escape?

‘Twas worse then ever before.

Rosalind

Morning in the Read household, and Bertie rose earlier than usual. He then proceeded to follow Rosalind about as she performed the many chores necessary that day.

‘Mama says she saw you packing her things into a trunk!’ he declared as Rosalind tossed the chickens their feed.

‘She is mistaken,’ Rosalind replied without energy.

‘Is she?’ Bertie challenged. ‘And yet I think she may not be far from the truth. Your behavior has been odd.’

‘Oh, Bertie, this again?’ Rosalind said with genuine weariness.

‘After days of your strange moods, I should say so,’ he said.

Rosalind turned and went back into the kitchen, finding the bucket where she put scraps and bread crusts for Snowdrop, the goat. ‘Bertie, you needn’t bother yourself on my account,’ she said. ‘Nothing has changed. I have no plans to send Mama abroad, or whatever fancy she has invented now.’

‘Why have you been so—so—’

‘So *what*?’ Rosalind demanded, turning abruptly to face him.

‘Well, this is a fair example, certainly.’

‘This?’

‘Yes, you never used to be so—so uncivil,’ he said.

‘Bertie, we have been living here almost for four years,’ Rosalind said, quite out of patience. ‘Are you aware of that?’

‘Why, naturally I am.’

‘And in that time, you seem to have relied quite unquestioningly on *me* to keep the household afloat.’

‘Nonsense! Haven’t my traps fed us many times?’

‘The poaching is part of the problem, Bertie! As you well know! How many times have we spoken on the matter?’

‘Rosalind, I do not know what will satisfy you. You complain of my—my reliance on you—whatever that means. And then when I try to contribute—’

Rosalind made a loud, unladylike noise of frustration and turned her back on him, marching out to the goat’s little stone house.

Bertie followed her. ‘’Tis those Weiss women, I daresay! They are ruining you. Your manners are deteriorating by the day.’

Rosalind seethed, holding the bucket as Snowdrop made short work of the contents, whilst Bertie continued to disparage the Weisses. When the bucket was empty she tied the lead to Snowdrop’s neck and handed the end to Bertie.

Bertie stopped speaking and stared at it. ‘What by Jove—’

‘Take her. Lead her out. Unless you prefer to muck her stall?’

Bertie gave Rosalind a look of sincere bewilderment and then delicately took the rope, leading the docile Snowdrop from the stall. ‘But—but what am I to do now?’

‘Take her to that patch of thistles, she shall be delighted to eat them.’

This effectively prevented any further conversation, and when Rosalind at last came and took the rope from her brother, he was all too happy to make himself scarce.

’Twas a small victory, but Rosalind felt pleased for the first time since she had learned the truth of Henry’s identity. She relished the sensation as she pursued to the rest of her chores.

Henry

‘Lord Linwood, I wonder, are you aware of how devoted Lady Alfreda truly is to you?’ Lady Harriet asked, leaning from where she sat on the sofa next to her sister, batting her eyelashes at Henry as he stood at the mantel.

’Twas the following afternoon, and since his return Henry had found himself impossibly listless, and quite incapable of shaking the dreary mood that hung about him.

‘Certainly, I understand ’twas her initiative to send the gardener to seek me out,’ Henry replied, a sense of being trapped and unable to flee weighing heavily upon him.

Next to Lady Harriet, Lady Clara never stopped giggling, whilst Lady Alfreda stood some distance away at the window, in a pose that Henry could not help but perceive as studied and dramatic.

She wishes to intrigue, and to be admired, Henry thought. *Her every movement is chosen carefully*.

’Twas his exposure to Rosalind that opened his eyes, he realized. Her lack of pretense contrasted sharply with the mannered behavior of Lady Alfreda.

The latter turned abruptly and caught his eye. ‘Lord Linwood, will you take a turn with me around the room?’

Henry suppressed a wince and instead walked to where she stood. ‘I see no purpose in taking a turn around the room, Lady Alfreda,’ he said. ‘This parlour is large, I suppose, but it makes for a poor

substitute for a garden, if exercise is what one seeks.'

Lady Alfreda blinked her blue eyes at him prettily, visibly taken aback. 'Why, Lord Linwood, how discerning of you.'

If I were to marry Lady Alfreda, I should look forward to such scintillating repartee every day for the rest of my life.

Henry rubbed his fingers across his brow to hide a grimace.

And all the while, I should remember Rosalind, and know what I lost.

'Tis unthinkable.

Lady Alfreda simpered at him. 'I daresay if a lady were more honest, she might admit that asking to take a turn about the room is only an excuse to place her hand on a gentleman's arm.'

With that, she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. 'Twas all he could do not to flinch away as though burned.

How very forward she is. I wonder if 'twould matter in the least to my father, were I to tell him.

A brief memory of the dream he had had returned to him. How in the dream she had behaved so vulgarly, but his father had refused to listen. 'Twas not far from how reality might turn out, he knew.

His Grace the Duke wishes to see me wed, if only to satisfy his sense of order, I daresay. And a marquess's daughter shall do very well, no matter her flaws.

'A turn about the garden, then?' Lady Alfreda suggested.

Henry allowed himself to be led outside.

As he walked down the garden *allée* with Lady Alfreda, Henry tried and failed to visualize his father's face, if he learned that Henry had proposed to Miss Rosalind Read, poverty-stricken commoner with calloused hands. The secret world he had shared with Rosalind could not exist in the same space as this awful, real world.

I wonder what he would say if he knew she refused to accept?

Henry felt a profound ache in his heart. He might have fought his father's plans, had he believed Rosalind would still have him. But she had been so hurt by the truth of his identity—and that he had hidden the return of his memories.

'You haven't said a word in a quarter of an hour,' Lady Alfreda remarked.

'Oh,' Henry replied stupidly. 'I beg your pardon.'

'I believe I know why you are so dull, my lord,' Lady Alfreda said.

Henry frowned, finding it difficult to bring his full attention to the conversation.

''Tis because of your absence, is it not?' Lady Alfreda said.

'I am uncertain as to your meaning, my lady.'

'You must have had a very lovely girl to nurse you.'

Henry was astonished, and froze involuntarily, staring at Lady Alfreda.

‘I have the right of it, haven’t I?’ she asked with a smile. ‘I can see it in your expression, my lord. You are pining for some farmer’s daughter.’

Opening his mouth, Henry could formulate no words for a reply. He shut his mouth again with a snap.

Lady Alfreda leaned close, pressing her bosom against Henry’s arm. ‘’Tis only natural to have formed an attachment, I daresay, my lord,’ she whispered. ‘Was she very pretty? And very kind, I have no doubt.’

‘I—that is to say—’ Henry stammered.

‘Oh, do not fret, my lord,’ Lady Alfreda continued. ‘You mustn’t think yourself the first young, titled nobleman to experience calf-love for some sweet little minx far his inferior. If anything, ’twould be surprising if ’twas your first time.’

Henry could not believe what he was hearing, and his mind refused to function normally, leaving him in continued wordlessness.

‘Was there never a charming little chambermaid? Or even a governess? I have heard of such liaisons...’

‘Perdition, no!’ Henry managed.

‘Ah, well,’ Lady Alfreda said, looking away but cutting her eyes to him from the side, a coy look that made him deeply uneasy. ‘Well, I should think that explains why you have come so completely under this girl’s spell, then.’

‘I—I am under no one’s spell,’ Henry protested.

‘Lord Linwood,’ she said, grasping his arm again. ‘There are ladies who will take an impractical view of such matters, I know. The fits of jealousy! The weeping and the rages!’

Henry stared at her in consternation.

‘But I am not among their number,’ Lady Alfreda asserted. ‘I can be imminently practical, my lord. I know that it may be my duty to turn a blind eye, my lord, a deaf ear…’

By the Devil! Is she suggesting that she would condone my partaking in dalliances with other women? With Rosalind?

Henry could scarcely believe it.

And even as the idea scandalized him, it tempted him, as well.

A townhouse for Rosalind, his heart whispered. *She might get with child —all the comforts my wealth could afford would be hers, however. I would see to the education of any children…*

Appalled at this line of thinking, Henry carefully extricated himself from Lady Alfreda’s grip.

Still, his heart whispered: *A proper wife, your father satisfied, and yet you would have Rosalind as well…*

I cannot consider it!

And yet, would it not mean happiness for everyone involved?

‘Pray forgive me, my lady,’ he said to Alfreda. ‘I am unwell.’

His mind in a tumult, Henry headed directly to the stables. He mightn't ride without invalidating Dr. Wallis's conclusions and endangering Rosalind and the Weiss ladies, for if he revealed he was not as injured as he had let the physician believe, the rest of his lies would no doubt unravel. Instead he must content himself with visiting Thunder. He lost himself in brushing the stallion and combing out his tail and mane.

The situation was insufferable. He must find a solution.

But how?

Chapter 20

That night Henry lay awake for all but a few hours, rolling over and back again, unable to sleep or even to be still enough to rest. The ball would be held the following night, and its looming approach devastated him.

They shall announce my engagement, unless I take some action.

And even as he dreaded this eventuality, his traitorous heart persisted in teasing him with thoughts of taking Rosalind as his mistress.

'Tis dishonourable even to consider it! he railed against the intrusive idea, but still it would not leave him be.

As he lay in the dark, the bed firm and warm, the room entirely too empty of the quiet presence of cats, his mind's eye conjured Rosalind: her elfish features, her grey eyes, her chestnut hair. The sun had given her complexion a rosy colour one should never see in the skin of a true lady. He cringed at the thought of his father's face if he beheld her.

And yet the thought of never laying eyes on her again, himself—'twas not to be borne.

To possess her—even if in irregular meetings, in some townhouse he gave her—he imagined her sitting at a fine dressing table, a maid brushing her long chestnut hair. She would turn as he entered, surprised and pleased to see him—

Though she might not be my wife, the living situation I could give her would be paradise compared to what she has now.

But the more he thought such justifications, the more uneasy he

became, without having the words to explain why.

Lady Alfreda would be my wife, he mused.

She seems more intelligent than I first credited her.

No, she is a preening, silly peagoose. She thinks only of marriage, no doubt in order to plan her gown and the decorations…she hasn't any depth of feeling at all.

At least, not for me. Despite all the talk about her devotion. She knows me not a wit, and cares not to remedy that situation.

Henry rolled on his side, opening his eyes in the darkness.

If Lady Alfreda becomes my wife, we shall sit together, morning after morning, day after day, night after night, with absolutely nothing in common. We shan't speak at all, after a time, I imagine.

Whilst with Rosalind, he could not count the numerous topics they had already discussed, and he would be most pleased to revisit, as well as the possibilities for new interests that opened up before him. What would Rosalind think of Linwood, he wondered? Much of the estate had fallen into disrepair. Would she enjoy the challenge of restoring it? And once that was done, might she like to have a holiday in Brighton? Would returning to London please her, or might she dislike the reminders there of her father and her old life?

How he wished he could one day know the answers to such questions. The dream of living the rest of his life with Rosalind at his side was far more sweet than any prospect of occasionally visiting her in some townhouse whilst married to Alfreda.

At last he dozed, and then slept fitfully, missing, unexpectedly, the old, half-broken bed, the breezy ruined cottage, and the cats,

especially.

When he rose, the following morning, Phillips surprised him with a tray of tea.

‘Oh, perdition, Phillips, what an inspired idea,’ Henry said, taking the cup with enthusiasm and gratitude after Phillips poured.

‘Certainly, Lord Linwood.’

‘How did you guess I would need it?’

‘’Tis the purview of a valet, my lord.’

‘Phillips, you know me better than anyone, I daresay.’

‘Only you might determine such a distinction, my lord.’

‘Do *you* think I should wed Lady Alfreda?’

This question arrested the valet. Henry had never seen him so ruffled.

‘I say, my lord—’twould hardly be *my* place, truly—’

‘No, Phillips, I insist,’ Henry said, running a hand into his unruly hair. ‘That is to say, I have fallen very dreadfully in love with another, but she is entirely unsuitable. A destitute girl. A gentleman’s daughter, yes, but greatly impoverished by the death of her father. No title, of course, never having belonged to the peerage, nor anyone in her family, I might hazard to say.’

‘My lord?’ Phillips murmured, clearly bemused.

‘When I was missing, Phillips,’ Henry said with an edge of impatience he instantly regretted. ‘Pray, forgive me, I am all out of sorts. When I was missing, she tended to me, along with some of her friends. And—and I fell in love with her, Phillips. I miss her most dreadfully.’

‘And you wish to wed her, my lord?’ Phillips asked.

‘It seems quite impossible,’ Henry said miserably. ‘And Lady Alfreda has suggested an alternative.’

‘Lady *Alfreda* is aware of this young woman’s existence?’

‘She guessed it,’ Henry said, and then explained Alfreda’s offer to turn a blind eye to Henry taking a mistress. ‘And I imagine it is the course most gentlemen of quality would choose.’

‘I see,’ Phillips said, still taken aback. ‘But you would prefer to marry the destitute lady?’

Henry, sitting at the small table by the window with his tea, became pensive, staring out at the grey morning. ‘If only you might know her, Phillips. She is clever, and spirited, and kind. There is no pretense in her. She is never false.’

‘Hm. I see. Lady Alfreda does present something of a contrast, in that regard.’

‘You think so as well! By the Devil, Phillips, it is satisfying to hear another say it.’

‘But mightn’t a talent for...dissembling, my lord—mightn’t it serve a lady well in the high society lords such as yourself frequent?’

Henry blinked. He had not considered this.

‘And a girl of low breeding, unaccustomed to the world of the peerage —though she might be clever, my lord—if she had no talent for dissembling, mightn’t she—that is to say, my lord, I am only attempting to imagine—she might find herself all the more vulnerable? And unlikely to succeed?’

Henry’s heart dropped. Could Phillips have a point? Might Rosalind suffer, living in Henry’s world? He had thought Alfreda’s penchant for pretense a flaw, but was it in fact an asset, when navigating the complexities of their social circles?

If such was the case, tucking Rosalind away in a townhouse might truly be for the best for all involved.

Henry finished his tea and allowed Phillips to ready him for the day ahead. Then when the valet had gone, Henry sat at the table again and composed a note. Hurrying now, enlivened with anticipation, Henry made his way through an outside path, taking a shortcut to the kitchens. He passed a servant woman picking roses, and gave her a nod.

To Henry’s satisfaction a kitchen boy was dallying near the door when he arrived.

‘You there. I’ve a message to be delivered.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the lad said at once, straightening his spine as he faced Henry.

‘You shall have to find the address yourself. This note is to be handed to Miss Rosalind Read and none other, do you understand? I shall give you a guinea for your efforts.’

‘Yes, my lord!’

The boy scampered off, well-motivated by the guinea, and Henry watched him go, anxiety growing within him. Would the boy find Rosalind? Would Rosalind agree to meet Henry in secret?

He would know soon enough.

‘I saw him myself, my lady,’ Joubert, Alfreda’s lady’s maid, said.

Joubert was pinning roses into Alfreda’s hair.

‘You are quite certain there was a note?’ Alfreda said.

‘There can be no doubt, my lady. He was holding it, and a moment later I saw one of the kitchen boys run away like the Devil was chasing him.’

‘A note,’ Alfreda breathed, her throat tightening.

Linwood has written to her, whoever she is. Why? Was it a farewell missive?

Oh, Alfreda, do not be a fool.

Alfreda watched her reflection silently as Joubert worked with her hair, never flinching through the maid would pull and stab with the miserable roses.

It had been a risk, making the offer Alfreda had, concerning Linwood’s paramour. She could not be certain that the gamble would result in success. Failure, however, was not to be borne. Linwood *must* marry Alfreda.

Her jaw clenched. She could not know the extent of the threat to her future without discovering the identity of the trollop who had turned Linwood’s head.

‘Who is she, Joubert? I must know!’

‘I do wish I might have the answer, my lady,’ Joubert replied regretfully.

‘You must uncover it,’ Alfreda said.

Joubert’s hands froze in mid-stab. ‘Pray, forgive me, my lady—I should have stopped the boy and taken the note. But ’tis too late for that now.’

Alfreda would not be dissuaded. ‘You shall follow his lordship, should he leave the estate. In all likelihood he sent the note in order to plan an assignation.’

‘My lady,’ Joubert said in protest, resuming her work.

‘If they meet, I must know of it, Joubert! I must learn who she is. And I must know what he says to her. Surely this is evident.’

Joubert made no reply, her face pinched with displeasure.

‘He may only wish to bid her farewell,’ Alfreda mused. ‘Or to tell her he shall give her carte blanche, perhaps.’

‘Carte blanche, my lady?’

‘’Tis an arrangement between a gentleman and a light-skirt, Joubert. Where he shall see to her needs, but never marry her. Do you take my meaning?’

‘Of course, my lady.’

‘If either is the case I have nothing to worry me. I shan’t give it another thought!’

Joubert moved to attend to the other side of Alfreda’s head.

‘But if he says anything…anything to indicate his reluctance to marry me…’

Alfreda patted the exposed skin above her décolletage in a gesture of nervous dismay.

‘That is why I must know who she is, Joubert. In case of such an eventuality. Her identity will be key, in such a situation. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Good. I am pleased you appreciate the gravity of this problem, Joubert. I am relying on you to find the answers I seek.’

Chapter 21

Rosalind was plucking raspberries from the bushes that grew on the south side of the Read cottage and thinking back to one of the last times she had gone with Papa to Hyde Park. They walked together, arm in arm, along the edge of the Serpentine.

‘Tell me, my dear, have you made your choice?’ he asked, beaming at her with affection.

How well Rosalind could still see his face in her mind’s eye. His rosy cheeks as round as apples, his grey eyes crinkled with mirth, his side whiskers tufty and windswept. He looked a bit like an elf, she mused. A cheerful, kind elf, the kind who might mend shoes for an impoverished cobbler, just for a lark.

‘My choice?’ she replied innocently, although she well knew to what he referred.

‘Yes, my dearest Rosie. Shall it be the wealthy gentleman, the minister, or the knight’s son?’

‘Oh, Papa, what an indiscreet question!’

In truth, the question unsettled Rosalind not because it was truly indiscreet, but because she had no answer, and that seemed troubling. Shouldn’t she know which beau she liked best? Should there be no hesitation in her heart?

‘Well, the Season is just beginning,’ Papa acknowledged. ‘Perhaps you shall make up your mind before…Candlemas?’

‘Papa!’ Rosalind exclaimed, her cheeks warming.

‘And if none of those three please you, I daresay you shall be introduced to several more very handsome young popinjays before the Season is out.’

‘Merciful heavens, Papa, you are incorrigible,’ Rosalind laughed. His smile only widened, and she was compelled to return it. She adored her father, and walking with him thus never failed to bring her joy.

Oh, Papa, how I miss you.

‘Beg y’pardon, mum, would you by chance know a Miss Rosalind Read?’

Rosalind startled, straightening from where she leaned over the raspberry bushes. ‘Twas a young, breathless lad.

‘Certainly,’ said Rosalind. ‘’Tis I you seek.’

‘Oh, *diolch byth,*’ the youth exclaimed. ‘I’ve been seeking ye all over the country for hours, mum. None but the Joneses knew where your cottage was, like.’

‘The post is delivered here well enough, I daresay,’ Rosalind remarked without heat.

‘Well, ’twould be a kindness was you to tell his lordship to use the post should he need to send any more messages, *oherwydd Duw*.’

Rosalind smirked at the lad’s cheek. He handed her a folded note, however, and her amusement gave way to a flare of anxiety mixed with joy.

‘This is from…his lordship the Earl of Linwood?’ she asked carefully.

‘None other, mum,’ the boy said. ‘I expect I should wait, mum, in case you’ve an answer?’

‘Oh,’ Rosalind said stupidly. ‘Why yes, I suppose you should.’

Turning her back on the boy, she unfolded the letter, her eyes cutting to the nearest window, fearful that Bertie might be peering through. He was not.

Her eyes scanned the graceful, firm lines.

Dearest Rosalind,

How dull I am. How dismal. And how full of remorse for the way I disappointed you. I cannot sleep or eat; ’tis a veritable fever I suffer, but only for missing you.

Say that you will meet me, my dear Rosalind, on the bridge east of Breacott, over the Wye. Be merciful, dearest, I beg of you, and say that you will come, at one this afternoon.

You impatient and devoted,

Henry

Rosalind folded the letter quickly and clutched it to her bosom. She knew not how to respond.

Meet him?

Her heart demanded that she accept the invitation at once.

Her good sense interjected: *You must not prolong this impossible fancy. To meet him would be folly; 'twould only lead to more heartache.*

Yet even as the protests formed, her longing for him welled up like an ocean wave large enough to wash everything else away. There was no hope of resisting it.

'Tell him I said yes,' she murmured to the boy, her cheeks aflame.

The lad had the good sense not to comment, and he bolted from her presence immediately.

Breathing in deeply, the letter still pressed to her, she closed her eyes, wishing to grasp some simulacrum of calm, in vain. Another profound inhalation did no better. Then the skin of her nape prickled. She felt she was being watched.

Her eyes flew open and she whirled to face the window.

It remained empty.

Unsettled, Rosalind took the letter into Snowdrop's stall and hid it under a grooming brush.

Bertie shan't set foot in here.

Distantly, the Breacott church bell rang twelve times: noon. Rosalind ran a hand over her hair in distress. Only an hour until one? She must hurry.

When she passed through the parlour, Mama was asleep in her favorite chair, but Bertie was nowhere to be seen. Reassured, Rosalind hastened to her bedchamber, where she changed into a clean walking dress and tidied her chignon. Tying on a bonnet, she took up a basket —she had not forgotten that she must fill it with some wild herbs or mushrooms or the like in case Bertie wondered about her outing—and headed from the cottage as quickly as she could without breaking into a run.

Even cutting through the forest, she might count an hour to reach the bridge. Indeed, when at last she arrived, Lord Linwood was already there.

His handsome liver-chestnut horse pulled up grass nearby, she noted. The earl was pacing from one end of the bridge to the other. She paused. He was muttering. Practicing what he meant to say to her? Anxiety surged within her breast. Why would he need to do so? Did he intend to give her unhappy news? Was this, after all, a meeting to bid her farewell?

Rosalind pressed her lips together in anguish as tears sprang to her eyes.

You mustn't be a coward now, Rosalind. You must face whatever comes.

With a shaky breath she pushed herself to walk again, and he saw her a moment later. With a look of delight he hastened to meet her, reaching out his hands for hers.

Quite impulsively, she reached out as well, and he took her hands—lacking gloves, for all her pretty gloves had fallen to bits after some time living here—and then he pressed her fingers to his lips.

A sense of rapture swept over her and she leaned closer, gazing up at him. Her hammering heart felt full and alive as it had not for days.

The tears which had come to her eyes moments before spilled, now from joy.

‘Oh, Henry,’ she murmured, her throat tight. ‘Are you glad to see me, even now?’

His only answer was to kiss her, deeply and ardently, wrapping his strong arms around her, pulling her slight frame against his powerful body. Everything around them disappeared, and all that existed was the kiss. When he broke away ’twas to separate from her by a mere inch and whisper, ‘Rosalind, Rosalind, what a great fool I have been.’

Such a confession came of the realization Henry had the moment he saw Rosalind at the end of the bridge.

By the Devil, how could I have ever entertained the idea of settling for a townhouse with her?

'Tis unthinkable.

She must be my wife.

Damn the judgment of the Ton.

Damn my father's petty desires.

Too long have I let such foolish forces coerce me to unhappiness.

No more!

I shan't stand for it.

Rosalind shall be my wife!

'My dearest love,' he said, his heart beating with courage and desire, 'I shan't bear another day without you by my side.'

He kissed her again, relishing the bliss of doing so.

Parting once more, he met her eyes with intensity of feeling. ‘There is a ball tonight at Corrach. You must come, and I shall introduce you as my betrothed, Rosalind. If you agree. Say that you will marry me, dearest Rosalind.’

‘By heaven, would that I could say yes!’

Her lovely grey eyes were wide and shining, tears staining her cheeks.

‘Do you not love me?’ he asked.

‘Henry! Of course I love you! I love you with all my heart.’

These words soothed him like none other.

‘Then why hesitate?’ he asked.

‘You—you are an earl, Henry! And I, a penniless commoner.’

Henry snorted, waving away such considerations with gusto.

The lady continued to protest, however. ‘And—oh—Henry, you do not know the truth of my situation—’

‘What could possibly matter so much that it should interfere with our future?’

‘My brother,’ Rosalind said miserably. ‘He is—that is we are hiding here—the authorities must never find him.’

Henry knit his brow in consternation.

‘My father’s death,’ Rosalind continued. ‘It came about in a riot, some four years ago. Papa was attempting to stop Bertie—oh, how dreadful it all was! And it was all my fault!’

Henry led her to the stone parapet, where they sat side by side. ‘Now you must explain yourself, my love, for you seem to speak a great deal of frightful nonsense.’

‘’Tis true, Henry! I swear it. Bertie had become involved with—with some ruffians, I suppose. Youths dedicated to noble ideals, but who wished to bring about change in the most extreme, violent way. Through orchestrating riots!’

Henry gazed at her, listening earnestly, although he knew little of the events of which she spoke.

‘You must have heard of Spa Field? There was a death, Henry. That was my father.’

‘Was your father one of these—these radicals?’

‘Not at all!’ Rosalind exclaimed. ‘He knew nothing of Bertie’s activities. He might have gone on not knowing, but Bertie told me of their plans, and I was afraid.’

‘You told your father,’ Henry said, comprehension dawning.

Rosalind nodded, biting her lips, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Henry produced a handkerchief and dabbed her skin dry.

‘You could not have known the day would turn so tragic,’ Henry said.

‘But I did know! I was afraid for Bertie, Henry! Surely I should have anticipated the danger to Papa, as well.’

‘Fathers can loom large in the eyes of children,’ Henry said knowingly. ‘They may seem like giants and gods, invulnerable to danger and tragedy. But they are, after all, only men, and they may make mistakes, and become victims of circumstances outside their control, or ours.’

Rosalind lowered her head and wept, and Henry pulled her against his chest, holding her silently as she emptied her heart of four years of self-blame and recriminations.

‘What is the meaning of this?’

A fellow Henry did not know stood at the end of the bridge, his face as red as cherries, his expression apoplectic.

Rosalind jolted upright, looking towards the fellow, bleary-eyed.

‘Bertie?!’ she gasped.

‘Unhand my sister, you blackguard!’

With a deep breath, Henry stood to face the young man. Rosalind jumped to her feet an instant after, rushing forward.

‘Bertie, what is the meaning of this? Did you follow me?’

‘I found this rake’s note to you, Rosie!’

Rosalind lifted a hand to her mouth in dismay. ‘Bertie, I beg of you, pray, say nothing more. I shall come with you at once.’

This was entirely unacceptable to Henry. ‘Nonsense,’ he said. ‘You have only to accept my proposal, dear Rosalind, and become my betrothed. You shall come with me back to Corrach.’

‘Your *betrothed*? Do you think us fools, sir?’ Bertie demanded.

‘I assure you I am all sincerity, Mr. Read,’ Henry said.

‘Bertie, *please,*’ Rosalind interjected with mounting distress.

‘And who are you, I’d like to know, sir?’ Bertie said.

‘I am Henry Orson,’ Henry replied. Restored to himself, he no longer felt such an antipathy towards his title, and in this case he hoped it might serve to calm the youth. ‘I am the Earl of Linwood.’

‘*Earl*?’ Bertie cried, in a reaction quite opposite to what Henry had anticipated. ‘*Earl?* Rosalind! I never took you for one who liked coxcombs such as this—but—but not just a coxcomb—not just a popinjay—but a *peer*! A member of the nobility!’

Bertie spat these words as if he could think of nothing more vile.

Taken aback, Henry closed his lips tightly, uncertain of how to respond.

‘Bertie, merciful heavens, you must not insult Lord Linwood—!’

‘Mustn’t I?’ Bertie snapped. ‘He seeks to ruin you, Rosalind, and you are too goose-brained to see it!’

With that Bertie crossed the distance between them and took hold of Rosalind's arm.

'I say, unhand her at once!' Henry said.

'Oh, *Lord* Linwood orders me to give him my sister, does he?' Bertie replied with bitterness. 'My apologies, my *lord.* You shall have to make your peace with disappointment, or we may come to blows!'

At this he yanked Rosalind behind him as he stormed away.

Baffled and appalled, Henry could only watch.

Chapter 22

‘Gilbert Read, I have had the misfortune of witnessing your most foolish, rattle-pated mistakes,’ Rosalind said once she was certain enough distance had elapsed between them and the bridge, ‘but this time you have outdone yourself!’

‘’Tis no news to me you haven’t an ounce of steel in you, Rosie, but to be gulled by the likes of that rake! Unthinkable!’ Bertie scoffed, pausing on the forest path.

His use of vulgar phrases told Rosalind how deeply the discovery of Henry’s nobility had upset him. He might as well be ranting to his old friends among the Spenceans.

‘Henry is no rake! He is a kind, thoughtful gentleman—’

‘Earl, you mean! Nobleman!’

‘Yes, and what of it?’

‘The peers are the reason England never progresses, Rosie! How many times have I told you—’

‘Henry knows nothing of that—’

‘You call him “Henry”!? What the blazes happened between you two? How did you even meet him? Is this who you’ve been creeping about to see these last weeks?’

A pang of shame tied Rosalind’s tongue, for it was true she had been

creeping about to see Henry.

‘Has he already dishonored you?’ Bertie demanded in horror.

‘Of course not!’ she cried. ‘How can you think such a thing?’

‘How can I believe a word you say?’ Bertie countered. ‘I thought you my dear sister, devoted to the family, and now I learn that you have been nothing but false and secretive for weeks, at the very least—perhaps even longer!’

Rosalind pressed a hand to her mouth in dismay.

‘Well, there’s an end to that!’ Bertie said, seething. ‘I forbid you to see him again. I forbid you to write to him, or accept any letter from him. Have I made myself clear? You are to cease all contact, once and for all!’

His words struck Rosalind each like stones, and she flinched as tears stung her eyes. She had known her love for Henry was impossible. She had known that soon enough, she should say farewell to him forever. But to have Bertie forbid her from ever seeing or communicating with Henry again—it felt too hard, too unbearably hard.

Her lips pulled back from her teeth in a grimace of pain, and she doubled over, clutching her belly as if stabbed. For an instant, Bertie’s face registered alarm, and he reached for her. A sob escaped her and she lurched away, then turned and fled into the forest.

‘Oh, dash it all, Frye, you’ve missed *again*,’ Alfreda’s sister, Arabella, cried in dismay.

They were all in the garden today, playing skittles. There were so many guests that they had made pairs. Arabella was partnered with Lord Frye, Lady Harriet with Tolbert, Lady Clara with Dedrick, and Alfreda with Lord Linwood.

Alfreda watched, delighted, as Arabella chastised Frye. Alfreda and Lindoow were in the lead, and she could think of nothing more delicious than a victory over her odious sister.

‘What a pity, Lord Frye,’ Alfreda said with insincere sympathy. ‘I daresay you throw too hard.’

‘Why Alfie, you surprise me,’ Arabella said peevishly. ‘I am unaccustomed to ladies showing such skill in sport.’

Alfreda narrowed her eyes at her sister.

‘I daresay noblemen notice such unusual inclinations,’ Arabella continued. ‘I suppose ’tis another explanation for your…difficulties.’

Alfreda drew in a deep breath. ‘Difficulties?’ she said with a little shake of her head and a deliberate glance at Linwood. ‘My heavens, Arabella, what can you mean?’

‘Hmf,’ was Arabella’s reply, and she made a point of turning her attention to Tolbert’s performance.

‘Lady Alfreda, I see your hem has a tear. Pray allow me to repair it,’ Joubert, Alfreda’s lady’s maid, said in quiet tones in her mistress’s ear.

Alfreda felt a tinge of annoyance—she was on the verge of defeating Arabella in the skittles tournament and her turn was approaching—but when she caught Joubert’s eye she understood.

‘Very well, Joubert, we shall see to it at once,’ she said, then turned and laid a hand on Lord Linwood’s arm, looking up at him fawningly. ‘I leave you with the duty of playing my turn, my lord.’

‘Erm, quite,’ the Earl said, his expression distracted.

Breathing deeply, seeking patience, Alfreda left, walking briskly at Joubert’s side.

Within the manor all was a buzz of activity, as frenzied servants hastened to prepare for that night’s ball. Alfreda and Joubert passed two chambermaids angling a large mirror to best reflect the light from a candelabra, a footman drawing chalk patterns on the ballroom floor, and the butler, Mr. Parry, arguing with the housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, about something to do with the musicians.

When at last Joubert closed the door behind them, Alfreda turned to her eagerly. ‘Well?’ she prompted. ‘When Lord Linwood returned and you did not, I wondered what happened.’

‘Indeed, I thought it best to make some inquiries, my lady, once I had some names with which to make them.’

‘Names?’ Alfreda breathed. ‘So he did meet someone—but more than one?’

‘That he did,’ Joubert confirmed, and she proceeded to describe how

the Earl had greeted the young lady who arrived at the bridge with unbridled passion, how they had sat together, speaking in an intimate fashion, and then the most alarming scene which followed when the lady's brother appeared.

'Her name is Miss Rosalind Read,' Joubert said, 'and the brother is Mr. Gilbert Read. The family is lately of London, and came under uncertain circumstances, from what several people have told me.'

'Uncertain?'

'Yes, they sold several pieces of silver for less than their value, for one,' Joubert said, 'and their belongings seemed very fine for a family reduced so greatly in situation.'

'That may be explained easily enough if they left London in debt, I daresay,' Alfreda said dismissively.

'Miss Read is known to frequent the local witch,' Joubert continued.

'The local *witch?*' Alfreda echoed.

'Yes, Mrs. Weiss or Oma Weiss, she was a midwife and still works as a wisewoman, and more than one person said she is a hedgewitch,' Joubert said. 'And furthermore, several of those I questioned told me they suspect Miss Read of poaching in the marquess's forests.'

Alfreda's interest flared. 'A suspected poacher!'

'Yes,' Joubert said. 'But the most interesting is what the postman told me. He says that all letters to Mr. Read are addressed to a Mr. "Bertram" Read, not Gilbert.'

Alfreda frowned. 'All of them?'

‘Yes,’ Joubert confirmed.

‘How strange. Why would everyone make the same mistake?’

‘Why, if he had told them to, my lady.’

Alfreda did not follow, and when she did not follow something, she was quick to feel vexed. ‘By heaven, make your meaning plain, Joubert.’

‘’Tis an alias, my lady. An assumed name.’

Alfreda’s frown deepened. ‘You mean, he has told his correspondents to refer to him by this false name?’

‘Indeed, my lady,’ Joubert said.

‘But why?’

‘Well, I daresay that, paired with the impression the family gave when they first moved to Corrach March, might imply that Mr. Read is hiding from someone. Perhaps even from the law itself.’

Understanding dawned on Alfreda. ‘You mean to tell me that the girl is a poacher and the brother is a criminal?’

‘It appears that may be the case,’ Joubert said carefully. ‘Although ’twas all talk, you understand. No one has seen either of them do anything untoward, as far as I can tell.’

Alfreda nodded, a grim smile touching her lips. ‘Nevertheless, I

believe this information shall prove very useful to me. Well done, Joubert.'

'I am gratified to have provided you with something of value, my lady.'

'Indeed. I shall make use of it at once.'

By the time Lady Alfreda reappeared in the garden, Henry had had to play her turn in the skittles tournament twice. She approached him in a direct manner Henry found graceless and vaguely unnerving; all the more so because it was so very unlike her.

‘Shall we take a turn through the roses?’ she said, taking his arm.

‘The tournament is not finished,’ Henry said, feeling stupid. He found it almost impossible to concentrate on anything at the moment, his thoughts were so filled with Rosalind.

‘Nevertheless,’ Lady Alfreda said in a startling show of assertiveness.

Henry allowed her to lead him away through tall hedges and into the portion of the garden dedicated to the cultivation of a dozen different types of roses. Lady Alfreda paid no attention to the lovely blooms as she passed them, but Henry gazed at them, thinking of Rosalind, and how he should like very much to give her roses, or see roses in her hair.

Red ones, Henry thought. *They would look delightful amid her auburn locks.*

When they reached the center of the rose garden, where a marble fountain trickled, Lady Alfreda stopped abruptly and turned to face Henry.

‘You’ve no intention of marrying me,’ she said bluntly.

Henry’s breath left him in a gust, and he could form no words.

‘You needn’t attempt some craven denial, my lord,’ she continued. ‘I know of Miss Read and your love for her.’

If she had surprised him before, she now thoroughly shocked him. Henry could only blink at her in consternation.

‘I *am* disappointed,’ she said, and for a moment he thought she meant that her disappointment lay in having no future with him. This was not the case, as she soon made clear. ‘I thought you a man of intelligence and breeding, not some moon-calf, witless and impractical.’

The change in Lady Alfreda’s demeanor was so complete, Henry wondered if he had succumbed to his head injury again somehow, and was now dreaming. She resembled the harridan of his nightmare far more than the lady he knew in waking life.

‘You are fortunate, however, for I shan’t allow you to make such a monstrous mistake. You *shall* marry me, Lord Linwood, whether you like it or not.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Henry finally managed to sputter.

‘You thought you might elope with the girl, I imagine,’ Lady Alfreda said, ignoring him. ‘Was it to be tonight?’

‘This is preposterous. I have no intention of eloping!’

‘Nonsense—oh,’ Lady Alfreda said, and then began to giggle. ‘Do you mean to say that you—oh! You would have brought her before your father? You would have attempted to wed her—*openly?*’

‘And why not?’ Henry said, thoroughly vexed and out of patience for

subtlety. ‘I may choose whomever I like as my wife!’

Lady Alfreda clicked her tongue reprovingly. ‘Such hubris. My dear Lord Linwood, that is not how the world functions. There are rules even an earl may not break.’

‘I should hardly be the first!’

‘Perhaps not,’ she said with a dismissive wave. ‘However, I shan’t allow it, as I said. You are, it appears, far more foolish than I initially judged. So I must take matters into my own hands. Consider yourself most fortunate, for you shall have a wife who prevents you from following your whims.’

‘What can you mean by this prattle?’

‘You shall wed *me*, Lord Linwood, by the end of this seven-day,’ Lady Alfreda said. ‘I require it, for if you refuse, I shall see to it that the Reads are brought before the Viscount Wyemouth. I know him well, my lord, for he is my cousin, and he oversees all matters pertaining to the violation of laws in his region.’

‘The *violation of laws?*’ Henry choked.

‘Indeed, perhaps you were unaware? Your lady-love is a poacher, my lord, and her brother may in fact be a good deal worse. The people of Breacott believe him to be a criminal in hiding!’

Thunderstruck, Henry could only stare at the lady as his mind attempted to grasp what he heard. That Rosalind was a poacher he in no way believed, but the accusation need not be founded for her to suffer an unjust conviction. And Bertie Read, he knew, was in fact hiding from the law. If Lady Alfreda made good on her threat, Rosalind’s brother had little hope of escaping justice.

‘You cannot be in earnest,’ he managed.

‘My lord, I assure you that I am. You have never had to confront the ghastly evils a lady must avoid from the moment she has made her debut,’ Lady Alfreda said. ‘And you mightn’t understand that I only do what I *must*. This marriage shall take place within the week. There is no other way.’

To Henry’s horror, he found that he must agree with her.

Chapter 23

The Marquess of Corrach's forests were vast. Rosalind had left Bertie behind an hour before, but still she fled blindly into the forest, her tears blurring her vision, her heart pounding so hard it filled her head.

I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it.

She pushed past trees, her fingers touching damp moss.

Images flickered in her mind, of Henry, of Bertie, of Mama... she loved them all, but dread filled her at the thought of each of them, for differing reasons.

Mama, I adore you, but how can I hope to care for you as you deserve, even if I do become a midwife? Someone must remain in the cottage, for you may one day become so confused as to be a danger to yourself...

Bertie, you are my brother, and for most of our lives my dearest friend, but how dreadfully we have grown apart—how cruel it is to know you blame me for father's death—and now you would forbid me my only happiness? When will you cease punishing me?

And Henry. Dearest Henry. How I long to accept your proposal, and to believe in the dream you offer me—but 'tis folly. 'Tis impossible. Merciful heavens, Henry—how shall I find the strength to let you go?

Rosalind stumbled as she ran, and blinked as she looked about her. She had left the path, and for a moment she knew not where she was.

A long, half-fallen tree twisted, emerald green with moss. Did she recognize it?

‘The eastern forest, I think,’ she murmured. ‘Not very far from Oma and Eira.’

She thought of her friends with a pang. Weeping, she considered running to their cottage for solace, but what could they do? Oma already showed great generosity in taking Rosalind as an apprentice. How would she react if she knew how Rosalind dreaded the future she trained her for?

All of it is too much.

I cannot bear it.

A strange looseness persisted in her heart. Bewildered by it, she at last recognized that it came from confessing everything to Henry. Somehow, in doing so, and in listening to his response, she had let go of the great shame she carried for so long.

Rosalind tried to slow her breathing as she leaned against the twisting tree.

I do not deserve a life of unhappiness.

This thought resonated within her like a struck bell. She felt wild.

Her fingers dug into the moist moss, cutting grooves in the rich green.

How can I return to the way things were before I met Henry?

I cannot!

That is what is truly impossible.

A sob escaped her and she began to run again, heading without consciously deciding to, towards the Weiss cottage.

Her foot caught in a bramble and she flew forward, hitting the ground hard, one hand slapping against a tree trunk.

A piercing pain seared the heel of her hand.

'Oh!' Rosalind yelped, yanking the hand to her.

A spider skittered away up the tree.

'A widow,' she breathed, going cold.

Indeed, the bite was already swelling, the skin reddening before her eyes.

'Oh, merciful angels, help me,' she murmured, terror racing through her.

It need not be deadly, Rosalind. Keep your wits.

But the panic surged, fueled by her despair and unhappiness.

Crawling to a sitting position, she held the hand against her breast, cradling it, for the pain had not abated but only grown since the instant of the bite. She dared not touch the site itself, but even the skin around it was growing very hot.

With shuddering breaths she attempted to calm herself, but she felt a

feverishness spreading through her and dizziness wash over her.

Oh, perdition. Oh, the Devil take it.

Rosalind tried to think. What should she do?

I shall die here in this forest.

For an instant, the idea gave her a strange sense of comfort.

She loved this forest, and what hope had she of a happy future?

The light shown green through the leafy canopy above, illuminating the trees, bushes, brambles and undergrowth. She might have been sitting at the center of an enchanted jewel.

Would it not be best to end everything here, where she could lie in the arms of this beauteous nature?

No!

Her spirit rebelled, and she was aghast at her own weakness.

And what of Mama's well-being, if you die?

What of Bertie's?

But this thought infuriated her.

Bertie can hang!

The rage she felt alarmed her desperately.

Of course I do not wish him to hang! What are these thoughts? Oh, dash it all.

It is not a true spider that has bitten me but some devilish imp. I am possessed with evil!

Nonsense, Rosalind, you take leave of your good sense with such claims.

Weeping, Rosalind closed her eyes, holding the bitten hand against her with a deep feeling of despair.

All hope is lost.

I am alone, and injured, and no one shall find me.

I am nothing but a weak, useless girl.

What can I do? I have never prevented tragedy before, when the danger of one loomed.

I must remain here. There is nothing else for me.

Chapter 24

Rosalind wept a little longer, until her inner strength overcame her fear and grief.

Stand, Rosalind. You may not let cowardice win this day.

Trembling and nauseous, she gingerly rose to her feet.

Now, you know where you must go, Rosalind. Enough of this senseless panic. To Oma, immediately.

Giving herself a little nod, Rosalind began to walk.

'Twas not so very bad, after all. Her head spun and her stomach turned, and her hand hurt dreadfully, but she did not stumble.

Time passed strangely. It felt as though she had been trudging thus for hours. She knew not whether 'twas so.

Oh, Henry, how I wish you were here.

You would carry me in your arms, I'm certain.

What a comfort that would be.

After an eternity, she saw the Weiss cottage as the trees parted ahead.

'Oh, merciful heavens,' she breathed in relief.

Pushing herself, she crossed the remaining distance and collapsed against the door in exhaustion. Doing so was enough to alert those within to her presence, much to her relief. Minutes that seemed endless to her passed, and then the door opened.

'Rosie! Why, what on earth has happened?' Eira cried, standing over her. Rosalind felt confused. How had she come to be here, in a heap on her friends' threshold?

'Who is it, Eira?' came Oma's voice from within.

'Oma, I say! Do come here, I need your assistance!' Eira called back to her.

The two Weiss ladies collaborated to half-carry Rosalind inside. They settled her on the sofa and Oma began examining her at once.

'A spider, Oma. A widow,' Rosalind managed, but her mouth was very dry, and her throat sore.

'*Autsch!*' Oma said. 'That is unfortunate.'

'Shall I fetch the anti-venom?' Eira asked.

'Ja, make haste. She is feverish. A bad reaction,' Oma said, pressing a cool hand to Rosalind's forehead.

A moment later, Rosalind felt a sharp pain at the site of the bite. She cried out, and felt strong hands holding her shoulders as she attempted to struggle. More pain followed, and then an odd, cold sensation. The rim of a cup was pressed to her lips, and she drank deeply of a peculiar-tasting tea.

‘There now, dear Rosie, you may sleep a bit,’ Oma said, patting her head gently.

Too exhausted to think of arguing, Rosalind did as she was told.

Henry

‘Are you unwell, my lord?’ Phillips, Henry’s valet, inquired when he arrived in Henry’s bedchamber to help the earl ready himself for the ball.

Outside, the light was a lovely golden colour, for the sun was beginning to set. Henry eyed the view from his window dismally.

‘I say, my lord, shall I fetch a pot of tea?’ Phillips persisted as he paused in his approach to the wardrobe.

‘Tea shan’t fix things this time, old boy,’ Henry said listlessly.

‘Why, whatever is the matter, my lord?’

Henry sighed. ‘All is lost, Phillips. All my hopes. I suppose I was a fool to entertain them as I did.’

‘The lady in the cottage, my lord? Has she refused you after all?’

‘No, not precisely, although if I am honest I must confess that neither has she accepted.’

‘Is there something else, my lord?’

Henry had to laugh, but ’twas a brittle sound. ‘Lady Alfreda,’ he said without energy. ‘She has revealed herself to be far more ruthless than I ever might have imagined.’

He relayed the conversation he had had in the garden.

‘By Jove, what a hobble,’ Phillips said. ‘Do you think she would truly have the Reads arrested?’

‘She impressed me with her purposefulness, Phillips. I do believe she would.’

Phillips turned to the wardrobe and busied himself with the contents without a reply.

Henry frowned. ‘Have you something to say, Phillips?’

The valet hesitated and glanced over his shoulder at the earl.

‘Oh, no, my lord,’ he said. ‘’Twouldn’t be my place.’

Henry snorted. ‘Oh come now. I have lost all hope and inspiration. Nothing you could say would make it worse. Speak, man.’

Phillips slowly turned from the wardrobe and gazed at Henry with an awkward set to his shoulders.

‘’Tis only that—I daresay I feared that your intention to wed Miss Read was impractical, my lord, but I also admired your resolve. You seemed at last ready to assert your independence. ’Tis distressing to see you trapped by another again.’

‘I haven’t any choice,’ Henry said defensively.

‘Indeed, my lord,’ Phillips replied, but something in his manner

unsettled Henry.

‘Phillips, surely you see that it is so? I haven’t any choice,’ Henry repeated.

‘Oh, yes, my lord,’ Phillips agreed.

Henry was ruffled. He began to pace as Phillips turned his attention back to the wardrobe.

I haven’t any choice!

Unless I do.

What choice could I possibly have?

Henry walked the width of the bedchamber and went back to the window on the other side.

Lady Alfreda threatens to have Rosalind and her brother arrested if I refuse to marry her!

By the end of the week!

Which gives me enough time to warn Bertie Read and whisk Rosalind off for an elopement. Once she is my wife, who would dare arrest her?

Henry froze in his tracks.

I may still have everything I desire, and I may still give Rosalind the life she so deserves!

I may give her everything of which she ever dreamed. We shall have a future full of happiness!

‘Phillips, you are a genius.’

‘My lord?’

‘Well, do hurry. I have to take a ride. Then there’s a ball to attend and a wedding to plan.’

‘A ride, my lord?’ Phillips said. ‘But the physician…’

‘Oh hang the physician, Phillips. He thought I had far more serious injuries than I truly did.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Phillips said, rather bewildered.

Henry smiled, his heart lifting with every breath.

He would make his own choices, and have the life he yearned for, and no one would find a way to stop him this time.

The earliest guests had begun to arrive at Corrach Manor when Lady Alfreda descended the staircase, wearing a new gown of golden brocade, her hair tucked in a modest chignon held up by a gilded crown, with tight curls framing her face. She felt very lovely, and enjoyed the looks of appreciation the guests gave her.

‘Alfie! What a delightful gown!’ came Arabella’s voice.

Inhaling deeply, Alfreda turned to face her sister, who stood aside from the staircase, her hand on her husband’s arm.

‘’Tis sure to get you noticed, I daresay,’ Arabella went on, a smirk on her face.

Arabella wore a hand-embroidered gown of silk dyed with the finest indigo. ’Twas not as eye-catching as Alfreda’s brocade, but Alfreda had to own that ’twas a splendid dress. It made her own golden gown look almost gaudy in comparison. Alfreda flushed, discomfited.

‘I thank you for your kind words, sister,’ she said through her teeth.

Turning away from Arabella rather pointedly, Alfreda scanned the crowd of guests. There would be well over five hundred people here tonight, and already more than a hundred must be present.

To her surprise, she saw Viscount Wyemouth among them. He was a tall man with freckles and fiery hair. Walking to him with a smile, she extended a hand as she curtseyed. He bowed over the hand gracefully.

‘Cousin, what a delight,’ she said with sincerity. ‘I have lately thought

of writing to you!'

'Have you, Lady Alfreda?' Weymouth said, returning her smile. 'To what might I owe the honor of a letter from you?'

'Oh, Wyemouth, 'tis rather scandalous. I have received word that we have a poacher living nearby, setting traps on our grounds, if you can imagine such impudence! I thought to inform you.'

Wyemouth raised his eyebrows. 'How dreadful,' he said. 'A poacher!'

'Yes, and there are rumors there may also be a criminal in the same household,' she added. 'A Mr. Gilbert Read. The poacher is his sister, Miss Rosalind Read.'

'You don't say? I do not know their names, but this is something I shall certainly investigate, dear cousin. I thank you for bringing it to my attention.'

When Rosalind woke, night was falling.

She sat up, blinking, and realized she had been laying on the sofa in the Weiss's parlour. Eira was seated in an armchair, sewing.

'How long did I sleep?' she asked.

'Only two hours,' Eira replied.

All the events of the day flooded her mind: the note, meeting Henry, pouring out her guilt and sorrow, Bertie's arrival, the terrible argument in the woods, the spider bite.

She looked at her hand. It was bandaged. With a tentative movement, she found it to be stiff and sore, but not in the hot, throbbing pain it had been previously.

'Oma said you should be well enough if you wish to walk home,' Eira said. 'Have a cup of tea first.'

She offered a cup from the tray on the table beside her.

Rosalind took it, sipping gratefully. She still felt thirsty.

'What on earth happened, Rosie?' Eira asked. 'You were in such a state when you arrived! The fright you gave me! Merciful heavens.'

Rosalind sighed and told her everything between sips of tea. Eira

listened earnestly.

‘Henry wished to present you as his betrothed at the ball this evening?’ she asked.

‘After all I’ve recounted, you’ve remained caught on *that* detail?’ Rosalind laughed.

Eira glanced outside. ‘Well, yes. I have a gown I was mending for the minister’s wife. Tisn’t very grand but it would pass at a ball, I daresay. And we’ve got the pony and cart. It mightn’t take more than an hour before we reached Corrach Manor.’

Rosalind stared at her friend, then set down her cup, as her hands had begun to shake. ‘Do you mean to suggest that I go?’

‘That is precisely what I suggest,’ Eira said.

‘Oh, Eira, I couldn’t!’

‘Why not?’

‘Why not? Eira, the spider bite—’

‘My goodness, Rosie, did you imagine it was very serious? Oma says you had a bad reaction, but she excised the poison and you shan’t have any complications, I am quite certain.’

‘But—’

‘Really, Rosie, how can you have any doubt? You love him.’

‘But Eira, ’tis all impossible! I could never be so brazen as to walk into that ball.’

‘And why not? Henry loves you, does he not? He has asked you to marry him *three* times, by my count. You should go to him at once, and tell him you accept. You mustn’t wait another moment.’

Rosalind blinked rapidly. Eira made it all sound so very simple. As though Rosalind was the one who had made everything complicated! But ’twasn’t simple in the least. Was it?

Her heart beginning to thump hard against her ribs, Rosalind pressed both hands to her mouth, tears pricking her eyes.

‘You must be brave, Rosie,’ Eira said. ‘You have this opportunity to seize your happiness. You must take it.’

Can she be in the right?

Rosalind’s heart did not hesitate. The answer was a resounding yes.

‘You have a gown?’ Rosalind managed in a squeaking voice.

‘I do,’ Eira confirmed with a smile.

‘Then I must be brave, as you say, and go to the ball.’

Chapter 25

Henry chose a docile piebald for a mount, not wishing to take any risks with his nervous stallion, Thunder, who had thrown him weeks before, leading to everything that had befallen him since then.

Stroking Thunder's nose, he whispered to him, 'I regret none of it, dear fellow, but I haven't time for another adventure just now.'

He gave Thunder a bit of apple, and promised to take him on a gallop the next day, then mounted the piebald swiftly.

Holding a lantern, Phillips waited on a bay mare, and together they were off.

Henry was uncertain as to the exact location of the Read cottage, although he had interrogated the kitchen boy so thoroughly the lad began to stammer with anxiety.

'South and west,' Henry said to Phillips as they went.

At a canter they followed paths through the forest, Phillips holding up the lantern to light their way. They found the outer wall of the grounds and eventually a section that had fallen down allowed their passage out.

Shortly after that, Henry was pleased to see the outline of a small cottage against the night sky; there was a full moon, which made their travel easier now that they had left the forest.

'Here it is, certainly,' Henry said.

A plan had formed in Henry's mind the moment he decided to elope with Rosalind. He would find her, warning her of Lady Alfreda's threats so she might pass the message on to Bertie. Afterwards, he would return to the ball and allow Lady Alfreda to believe her scheme was successful, planning the wedding with her and announcing their engagement to the guests. Then, two days from now, he would come with a carriage and take Rosalind with him to Linwood, where they would be married. 'Twas a simple plan, and thus he felt confident in its likelihood of success.

Joy made Henry dismount lightly, a spring in his step as he went to the door. Phillips remained with the horses. At Henry's knock, the door swung abruptly open, startling him.

Instead of the beloved face he hoped to see, a disheveled Bertie greeted him.

'You! Bloody hell!' Bertie exclaimed.

'Bertie, is it Rosalind?' a trembling voice called from within.

'No, Mother!' Bertie snapped, then stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

'Is Rosalind not at home?' Henry asked, concern instantly filling his heart.

'She's missing, thanks to you!' Bertie said, glaring at Henry furiously.

'Missing?' Henry echoed in alarm.

'She's gone mad,' Bertie seethed. 'You've turned her head! She would hear no sense, and ran off into the forest.'

Some of Henry's fear seeped away. Rosalind was entirely at home in the woods. She was unlikely to have come to harm.

'Did you think to check for her at the Weiss cottage?' Henry asked.

Bertie did not answer, but Henry could see from the sullen expression he wore that he had not.

'I daresay she's gone there for comfort from her friends,' Henry said.

'I've forbidden her to see you anymore,' Bertie said. 'You're not to contact her.'

Henry snorted. 'Rosalind will be my wife, Mr. Read. You shan't keep us from our happiness. No one shall.'

He thought of Lady Alfreda.

''Tis only for Rosalind's sake that I feel I must warn you,' Henry said to Bertie, 'that the marquess has heard rumours of your presence here, Mr. Read. There are those who believe you are in hiding, under an assumed name. He shall doubtlessly have the matter investigated.'

In the light of the full moon, Bertie's complexion was already bluish, but when Henry said these words he paled alarmingly.

'I—I see,' Bertie stammered.

'I shall return on the morrow,' Henry said. 'And I shall speak with Rosalind then, Mr. Read. Do not attempt to stop me.'

Bertie's eyes narrowed with vexation, but he said nothing as Henry

turned and remounted his horse, riding back to Corrach Manor.

‘I should think these gloves will fit over the bandage,’ Eira said, helping Rosalind on with the long, lacy things. Rosalind winced as she did so on the wounded hand, but once it was on, it did not bother her. Eira tightened the draw-strings at the wrists and elbows. ‘There. Perfect.’

Rosalind used the window as a mirror, looking at herself with a heart so full of joy and hope she thought it might burst. Eira had put her hair up with a wreath of simple wild roses, their petals a pale pink, their centers soft yellow. The gown was white, trimmed with yellow ribbon.

‘A veritable fairy of autumn, I declare,’ Eira said.

Oma entered through the front door then, wrapped in her shawl and carrying a basket. She took in the scene: Rosalind looking at her reflection, dressed for a ball, with Eira beside her in her driving clothes.

‘Going somewhere tonight, *meine perlen*?’

‘Rosie has a ball to attend!’

Oma smiled. ‘You are not dizzy, Rosie? Not too fatigued?’

Rosalind’s heart accelerated with anxiety. ‘Do you think the spider bite too recent to go out?’ she asked.

Oma peered at her. ‘Your color is good, ja. Many have a bite and continue their day. Your reaction was severe, but if you feel well now,

why not?'

Rosalind licked her lips nervously.

'You shall be well,' Eira asserted. 'Now come along, we mustn't tarry.'

They hadn't a fine pelisse to lend to Rosalind, so Eira and Oma wrapped her in Oma's shawl.

'I shall pray all goes well,' Oma said warmly, kissing Rosalind's cheek.

'Thank you, Oma,' Rosalind replied, her throat tight with emotion.

'Come along, now, Rosie!' Eira exclaimed.

They climbed together into the pony cart and Eira drove, clicking her tongue and flicking the reins to urge the pony, Buttercup, to a trot.

'Oh, Eira, what shall I do? I haven't an invitation,' Rosalind fretted, not for the first time.

'Lord Linwood invited you!'

'But I haven't a card or a letter or anything of the sort.'

'I shan't let them turn you away, dear Rosie. You shall see.'

Rosalind had to be contented with this promise, although she could not see how Eira might change anything if someone challenged her presence. They had agreed that Eira should act as Rosalind's lady's maid, so she would remain at Rosalind's side, come what may. This comforted Rosalind, if nothing else.

When they at last passed through the large, grand gates of the drive leading to the front of Corrach Manor, a few carriages were still rolling up, but the majority of the guests had already arrived.

Rosalind gasped as she took in the entirety of the vast manor. She had never approached it from the front, always catching sight of it between the tops of trees. The size of it struck her with all its majesty now. The Elizabethan house was a palace. Rosalind counted five storeys including the tops of the multiple ogee-capped towers. All around there were frilled balustrades, and countless tall chimney-shafts in the form of Tuscan columns.

Rosalind glanced at Eira, who was studying the house pensively.

‘’Tis astounding, is it not?’ Rosalind said.

Eira frowned. ‘’Tis far too large a house for any family,’ Eira said. ‘One would very likely become lost within. How dreadfully lonely to live there. I imagine one must write letters to keep in touch with the other residents.’

A surprised laugh escaped Rosalind. ‘You cannot mean it, Eira. The house is extraordinary.’

‘No, it is terribly pretentious and fussy,’ Eira pronounced with finality.

They said nothing more on the topic, riding up the drive until they came at last to a halt.

With a deep breath to steady her rattled nerves, Rosalind descended the cart. Eira joined her, and together they made their way to the towering front doors, avoiding puddles that reflected the full moon. They climbed the marble staircase, and entered the grand foyer.

There, just as Rosalind had feared, a footman confronted them.

‘Good evening, my lady,’ he said in a most respectful tone. ‘May I have your invitation, so as best to announce you?’

Rosalind’s heart hammered, and her cheeks flushed, and she opened her mouth to make some excuse—

‘Oh!’ cried Eira in tones of the greatest offence.

Rosalind looked at her, but could perceive nothing wrong.

‘Oh, my heavens!’ Eira exclaimed again. ‘You blackguard! You horrid, odious fellow!’

The footman blinked at her, bewildered, for she seemed to be addressing him.

Eira lurched forward and the poor man caught her.

‘Oh!’ she cried again. ‘Oh, unhand me you wretch!’

Rosalind, appalled, raised a hand to her mouth. Eira was pretending the footman was assaulting her person. What a shocking ruse!

But what was she to do but take the opportunity Eira gave her?

Her cheeks aflame, Rosalind slipped past, leaving the unfortunate fellow to extricate himself from Eira in whatever way he could manage. The manor was teaming with people, and she felt quite invisible as she joined the crowd.

Next, to find Henry.

Chapter 26

‘Another dance, Lady Alfreda?’ Lord Linwood asked, after a little bow at the end of the last *allemande*.

Alfreda curtseyed and nodded. She was very pleased. Linwood was not only resigned to his fate, it seemed, but he had embraced it. This was their third dance, and everyone would notice. True, he had not yet made the announcement of their betrothal, but she felt confident he would do so tonight as planned.

She cast a glance at where Arabella stood beside her husband, the Duke of Mirklewick. Alfreda delighted in the look of annoyed discontent on her sister’s face. Mirklewick had no interest in dancing, it seemed, and now that Linwood was showing Alfreda his attentions, Arabella had little to amuse her.

The quartet began a country reel, and Alfreda smiled at Linwood.

‘How happy you look tonight, my lord. There is a spring in your step,’ she said.

‘Indeed, I find the future that lies before me very much to my liking,’ he replied, turning to the side as the dance required.

Alfreda spun around him, keeping her gaze locked to his, joy easing her movements. Never had a ball so entertained her as it did tonight. What a pleasure it all was, now that she knew at last her prize was within her grasp.

‘I wrote to the vicar, you know,’ she said, testing to see if his cheerful mood would waver. ‘I invited him to come to Corrach by the end of the week.’

Linwood smiled at her. ‘How thoughtful.’

Alfreda studied his face but could find no hint of tension.

He truly has embraced our union.

Her happiness increased. Linwood shuffled to the right as she went left, then they spun around each other and returned to facing one another.

‘I daresay we should wait no longer,’ Linwood said to her, his tone pensive.

‘My lord?’

‘An announcement is in order, is it not?’

Alfreda’s heart began to pound. ‘If you wish it, my lord,’ she managed, though she thought she might burst with excitement.

Lord Linwood gazed at her with an expression she could not read, then offered her his arm. She took it, and he led her to the little raised platform where the musicians were assembled. As they climbed up, the music faltered and stopped.

Triumphant, Lady Alfreda surveyed all of the guests, her eyes finding Arabella and resting on her with a deep sense of vindication.

At last, her moment had come.

Rosalind had watched as Henry danced with the lovely blonde; twice at least, and she knew not how many times before that. She listened to the murmurs as others watched as well.

‘Lord Linwood seems well recovered from his misadventures now.’

‘How delightful to witness such an enchanting attachment between Lady Alfreda and Lord Linwood. She never gave up hope, you know.’

‘Do you think he shall propose tonight? I do wish he would.’

With all the strength of will she had built over the last four years, facing disappointment and working as no gentleman’s daughter should ever have done under better circumstances, Rosalind raised her chin and refused to weep.

‘Oh, my heavens. *Another* dance.’

‘What a fine couple they make. He has that untamed quality, whilst she is a perfect English rose.’

‘Why, look, he leads her to the dias!’

Rosalind blinked, furious with herself for the tears blurring her vision, and focused on Henry again. Indeed, he did lead the beautiful lady to the musicians’ platform. They walked up, the lady holding Henry’s arm.

His strong arm, which I loved to hold. I daresay I never shall do so again.

What had happened? What had changed? Had Henry lied to her? She could not believe it. And yet, she could not deny the evidence before her eyes and ears. It seemed that everyone in the ballroom believed Henry to be in love with this Lady Alfreda. And why not? She was a noblewoman, beautiful, graceful, and eminently suitable.

He loves me. I know he does!

Could her heart be so misguided? How could she have been so mistaken?

I am not. I am not mistaken! He loves me as I love him!

Perhaps some other pressure forced him to this choice, if so.

Whatever the reason, Rosalind could not pretend that what unfolded before her was imagination. She knew what was coming. Henry intended to announce his betrothal to Lady Alfreda.

All she could do was watch.

Despite his conviction that his scheme would be a success, Henry found he disliked it more with each passing moment.

Lady Alfreda had threatened the lady he loved, and he would not forgive her for it soon, but the joy in her eyes as he deceived her gave him pause. Evidently, this marriage he promised her must answer all of her most heartfelt wishes, although he could not truly understand why. She had no regard for him; she had made that plain. Nevertheless, her smiles tonight had been far more genuine than any she had ever given him before, of that he was certain. He felt a shabby villain to playact in this way, planning to leave her in two days' time, disappointed and betrayed.

Inhaling deeply and searching for courage, Henry turned and faced the vast audience watching with quiet anticipation. Lady Alfreda tightened her hand on his arm, beaming out at the waiting viewers.

'Esteemed guests,' Henry began, projecting his voice to fill the high ceilinged room. His eyes traveled over the faces, hardly taking any in.

He saw the Marquess of Corrach and his wife standing side by side, watching with interest. His own parents, the Duke and Duchess of Kenling, stood further back. His mother blinked and looked about in a way that struck him as fretful and bewildered. His father, however, watched him with fierce intensity, as if willing Henry to get on with it.

Enjoy this moment, Father, for your victory shall be short-lived.

'Esteemed guests, I am honored by your presence,' Henry continued. It struck him that he must lie to everyone here; how many were there? Four hundred people?

He let his eyes move on, a sense of unease mingling with underlying rebellion.

Then they caught on one face.

The large grey eyes stared into his own, shining with unshed tears. The chestnut hair framing the heart-shaped face was pinned up with wild roses. Rosalind. She had never been more beautiful.

Henry's voice deserted him. He was frozen in place. All he could do was look at her.

Beside him he sensed Lady Alfreda's confusion, but he found it impossible to break the spell.

'Rosalind,' he breathed at last.

'Oh,' Lady Alfreda gasped in displeasure.

'I apologise,' he said more loudly, and left the platform, cutting through the crowd without a look back at Lady Alfreda. He had only one goal: reach Rosalind at once.

When he did he yearned to take her in his arms. Only all his years of education prevented such a scandalous display. She stared into his eyes as he stared into hers, wishing to drown himself in their grey depths.

'Henry?' she whispered uncertainly.

'My dearest love,' he murmured back, and took hold of her hand, placing it on the crook of his arm and escorting her through the muttering crowd and out of the doors to the terrace.

Chapter 27

Emotion swept through Rosalind like a flood. She could hardly see for the tears in her eyes, but she cared not, for her hand rested once more on Henry's steady arm, and nothing else mattered.

The cool night air smelled divine as they exited onto the terrace. He turned to her, and she blinked away the tears, smiling up at him. His golden eyes crinkled at the corners and he leaned closer.

'Stop this outrage at once!'

With a sharp inhalation Rosalind turned to the speaker: 'twas none other than Lady Alfreda. Behind her Rosalind spied multiple people staring through the windows.

'Henry, we are the object of many stares,' Rosalind breathed.

'The Devil take it,' Henry said, and put a hand on Lady Alfreda's shoulder to steer her with Rosalind into the shelter of the hedge-lined garden alleys. The lady would have none of it, however.

'Unhand me, lout,' she spat.

'Lady Alfreda, the guests—'

'Oh, hang the guests!' Lady Alfreda exclaimed. Rosalind was astonished to hear such language from a noblewoman. 'You cannot do this, Linwood! I won't have it!'

Henry inhaled deeply. 'I beg your forgiveness for my duplicity, Lady

Alfreda,' he said. 'I saw no other way, but I will own that it was badly done—'

'Badly done? Have you given leave of your senses?' Lady Alfreda demanded.

'The truth is, my lady, that I never had any intention of marrying you. My heart and my life belong to Miss Read.'

'Oh!' Lady Alfreda scoffed, turning to the side in her distress, the golden brocade of her skirts catching the light as it whirled.

'I should never have deceived you as I did, however,' Henry continued. 'I regret doing so.'

Lady Alfreda faced him again, two red spots in her cheeks, her blue eyes narrowed fiercely. 'Have you forgotten my warning, Lord Linwood?' she snapped.

'Warning…?' Rosalind echoed.

Lady Alfreda glared at her. 'Yes, my dear girl. I know of your poaching, and that your brother is a criminal! And did you know, Lord Linwood, that Viscount Wyemouth is just within? I daresay he might be very interested to meet Miss Read, and hear what I have to say!'

Rosalind's throat closed with panic, and her eyes darted around for some means of escape.

'Don't be foolish, Lady Alfreda!' Henry countered. 'Think of the scandal! You shall never hear the end of it. You may ruin Miss Read's life and my happiness, but you shall stain yourself at the same time.'

Rosalind's mind was in a turmoil of fear.

I cannot be arrested. I cannot allow them to find Bertie!

'How dare you pretend to care for my reputation now, Lord Linwood!' Lady Alfreda said.

I must flee. I must not be taken.

'Where was your concern when you intended to abandon me before our wedding? For I imagine that was your plan! And now—now look at what you have done, walking away just as everyone waited for your grand announcement!'

Rosalind peered into the garden and movement caught her eye. She narrowed her gaze, attempting to decipher what she saw.

''Twas a dreadful scheme,' Henry was saying, 'but I only came to embrace it because you would force my hand!'

There it was again. Then a face came briefly into the moonlight. Rosalind clapped a hand over her mouth, aghast.

Bertie!

'My life *is* ruined,' Lady Alfreda went on. 'My reputation is in tatters, because of you! I shan't rest until your life is in shambles as well.'

Oh, Bertie, no!

Rosalind could not bear it; Bertie was moments from revealing himself, she was certain. Someone would see him, and Lady Alfreda would call for Viscount Wyemouth, and everything would come crashing about her ears.

Thoroughly unnerved, Rosalind broke away from Henry, plunging into the darkness of the garden in the hopes of luring Bertie away from the house.

‘Rosalind!’ he called as the lady disappeared into the hedges.

‘You see, Linwood. She has no breeding,’ Lady Alfreda declared, as though Rosalind’s flight somehow vindicated her ladyship.

‘’Tis you who have revealed yourself to be a vulgar, mercenary woman,’ Henry said. ‘What a mask you wear!’

‘You might understand needing such a mask, if you were a lady,’ she replied.

‘Might I? I doubt it. I should never force a fellow into marriage—tis a state that lasts a lifetime, more often than not. Confound it, why would you want to tie yourself forever to someone who hates you?’

‘What choice have I? I must marry! And I must marry well! My sisters married well. A duke and a prince, by heaven! Am I not worth at least an earl?’

Henry frowned, looking at her anew. ‘Is that what you believe? That your only worth should be determined by the title of the man you marry?’

She glared at him. ‘That is how the world has determined my worth, my lord.’

‘Then perhaps you might consider telling the world to go to the Devil!’

For the first time since the confrontation began, Lady Alfreda had no

ready retort. After a pause, however, she resumed, ‘Easily said, for you may do so, my lord, as a man.’

‘I cannot pretend to know the difficulties faced by one of your sex, Madam. However, I can say that allowing others to direct one’s life is abhorrent, and leads only to unhappiness.’

‘I have no choice!’

Henry gazed at her pensively. ‘Is that really true? Or do you cling to the idea, for the alternative is too frightening to contemplate?’

That silenced her entirely, and Henry took the opportunity to follow where Rosalind had fled.

Despite the full moon, the alleys between the garden hedges were dark. Rosalind ran at first, but after the second time her foot caught something in the dark and she fell against a prickly hedge, she had to slow her pace.

‘Bertie,’ she whispered, afraid to call too loudly and bring someone else into the alleys to look for him.

Still she walked, turning at intersections, uncertain of where she was. The garden was not precisely a maze, but near enough to it so that, in the night, one could easily become confused and lost.

Sighting a tall statue with a plaque identifying him as Edward IV, Rosalind was just beginning to feel the prick of anxiety that she might indeed have lost her way when a hand grasped her wrist and yanked her between a large willow tree and a boxwood.

Chapter 28

‘Bertie!’ she gasped.

Her brother was glowering at her, his features hard to see in the dim. ‘Rosie. Hell and damnation. I never thought to see the day!’

‘You never thought to see what day?’ she demanded. ‘You’re the one who has taken an atrocious risk, coming here!’

‘Me? I’m not the one attempting to throw away my honor with both hands!’

‘Oh, what rot!’

‘Well, at least I’ve found you. Come along. We’re going home, and you are *never* to set foot on this estate again.’

‘I shall find that difficult if you wish to eat a full meal someday soon.’

Bertie groaned. ‘What nonsense are you spouting now?’

‘This estate. The forests. You eat the mushrooms, berries, and wild plants I serve you happily enough. Where did you think they came from? How did you imagine I came across your traps if not by trespassing in this estate myself?’

‘Enough of this, Rosie. Come along!’ Bertie said, turning as though to leave.

‘I love him, Bertie.’

Bertie froze and then turned back to look at her. ‘Then you are a fool.’

‘Am I?’

‘Nobles have only one desire when it comes to commoners like us, and it is to exploit us in whatever way they can!’

‘That may be true of some, but Henry is different!’

‘He is a rake! He only wants to ruin you!’

‘He wants to marry me!’

Bertie dug a hand into his hair. ‘And what of us? What of Mama?’

A stab of pain in her heart made Rosalind press a hand to her breast. ‘And here is the truth. You are not fearful of Henry’s intentions. Only that I shall leave you alone to care for Mama.’

‘Both may be true at once,’ Bertie said, his voice sorrowful.

‘You care nothing for my happiness.’

‘’Tis your fault we are here!’ he snapped, suddenly furious. ‘You told Papa where I was going! If it weren’t for you, he would still be alive today.’

Rosalind shuddered, the grief like new.

‘That is false, and you know it, Bertie,’ Rosalind said, her voice trembling. She squared her shoulders and faced him, ready at last to speak the truth. ‘Papa died in a riot *you* helped foment, Bertie. If either of us is to blame, it is you.’

Bertie gasped as if struck and stepped back from her. ‘How—how can you say such a thing?’

‘For four years I have carried the burden of the blame for Papa’s death,’ she said. ‘But no more. I was a child who turned to her father in a moment of fear for her brother’s safety. I shall no longer be faulted for it.’

Saying the words loosened the last of the guilt she carried, and it fell from her heart like cut ropes.

‘I have done everything in my power to provide for your needs, and Mama’s,’ she said. ‘I was willing to give up my future to continue to do so. But such a sacrifice is asking too much, Bertie.’

‘How can you say this, Rosie? You would abandon Mama?’ Bertie cried.

‘Certainly not.’

Rosalind whirled—it was not she who had spoken, but Henry.

‘Rosalind, why have you never spoken to me of your Mama? Is she ill?’ Henry asked, his voice tender.

Rosalind ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. ‘Henry, would you really agree to care for her?’

‘But of course, my dear,’ he said into her hair as he held her close.

‘Unhand my sister this instant, you rogue!’

Rosalind left Henry’s embrace, confronting her brother. ‘Cease this nonsense at once, Bertie! I love Henry and I shall marry him. You must accept it.’

Bertie’s hands were fists at his sides and his shoulders bunched with tension. ‘I forbid it! And I shall have satisfaction, Linwood.’

‘I should think a gentleman hiding under an assumed name might hesitate before challenging a peer to an illegal duel,’ came a feminine voice from the shadows.

Lady Alfreda stepped into the moonlight.

Bertie stared at her, and she studied him with interest.

Rosalind slipped her arm through Henry’s and looked up at him. He leaned to her and whispered, ‘Is it true? You intend to marry me, dearest?’

‘Oh yes,’ she murmured back.

Then she returned her attention to Bertie and Lady Alfreda. ‘Pray, my lady, I beg you, do not have Bertie arrested. He was foolish, but he never meant any harm.’

Bertie made a scoffing noise, but there was a note of grief within it.

Lady Alfreda’s gaze flicked from one face to the next, and she lifted her chin with an air of wounded pride. ‘I wash my hands of the lot of you,’ she said, and disappeared back into the hedgerows.

‘Her humiliation when she returns to the ball may change her mind,’ Henry pointed out to Bertie. ‘You had best flee, Mr. Read.’

Bertie hesitated, looked at Rosalind helplessly. ‘I only ever wanted what was best for you, Rosie.’

‘I daresay you believe what you say, Bertie,’ she replied. ‘But now you must trust that I shall make that choice for myself.’

‘Tell Mama I shall write to her soon,’ her younger brother said, and then he was gone.

Rosalind sighed, her heart aching with an uneasy combination of sadness, joy, and hope. She leaned against Henry, who turned her in his arms and looked down at her with adoration in his eyes.

‘My dearest Rosalind,’ he said. ‘How ardently I love you. Nothing shall prevent me from making you mine.’

With that, he kissed her, holding her tight. Rosalind closed her eyes, losing herself in the kiss, warmth wrapping itself around her until she felt she floated in a lovely cloud of happiness and love.

Chapter 29

‘Are you certain you’ve the courage for this?’ Henry asked Rosalind as they neared the terrace.

Light glowed in the windows of Corrach Manor, and many guests were visible through the glass.

‘Knowing I shall be your wife, I may brave any terror,’ Rosalind said with a smile.

‘I shall never waver,’ Henry promised her. ‘Nothing any of them can do or say shall prevent me from my future with you.’

‘Then let us proceed.’

Henry placed his hand over hers, the rough texture of her lace glove pleasant under his fingers. Together they re-entered the ballroom. The crowd parted for them at once, as though everyone had been waiting for them; this was very likely the case, Henry knew.

Everyone stared: matronly ladies in feathered turbans, gentlemen in silk neckcloths, young debutantes with curls about their faces. Henry guided Rosalind to the dias, just as he had Lady Alfreda.

Once he turned to the guests, all muttering and murmurs stopped.

‘My apologies,’ Henry said to them. ‘I am certain many of you must be most bewildered. I daresay the last weeks have bewildered me a great deal, as well.’

As his eyes flicked over the faces, he caught sight of his father glowering at him from within the crowd. His mother had taken a seat on a side bench, looking pale.

Henry continued, ‘A great deal has happened, and I shan’t claim it changed me. Rather, it revealed the truth to me of who I always was.’

Whispers traveled at this.

Henry ignored them. ‘Most importantly, I had the good fortune of encountering this lady, Miss Rosalind Read. She has accepted my proposal of marriage. Allow me to introduce you to the future Countess of Linwood.’

The whispers became talk and exclamations. Henry’s father went crimson. Henry’s mother fanned herself, looking about her as if for aid.

‘We are well aware that some of you may not approve,’ Henry said, glaring at the Duke. ‘But we have little need of your good wishes. By the week’s end we shall leave for Linwood. I thank you all for coming to the ball. Goodnight.’

With that, Henry led Rosalind from the platform and through the ballroom, out to the foyer. He waved to a footman. ‘I shall require my gig.’

‘You *idle,* disorderly, incorrigible *vagabond*!’ came his father’s outraged voice.

‘Your Grace…’ his mother whined, hurrying to intercept her husband as he stormed out of the ballroom to assail Henry and Rosalind.

‘Silence, Frances!’ the Duke barked at his wife. ‘This is all *your* doing! If you hadn’t coddled the boy! Spoiled him! None of this would have

happened!'

Henry stepped between Rosalind and his parents, aware that his betrothed was dismayed by the scene.

Facing his father, he straightened his back but said nothing, waiting for the Duke to spend his anger.

'Indolent fool,' Kenling said to his son. 'My attempts to teach you discipline have all failed, I see. You choose ruination rather than honor!'

Henry gritted his teeth. This was very close to an insult to Rosalind, and that he would not allow.

'If you persist in this capricious course, I shan't see you again, Linwood,' the Duke warned. 'I shall cut you off.'

Henry's mother made a whimpering noise.

This was enough for Henry. 'Very well, Your Grace,' he said to his father. 'I believe 'twould be best for everyone if such were the case, going forward. You may remain at Kenling and in London, for I've no interest in living in either of those locations. I shall go to Linwood and see it restored.'

This was not what the Duke desired to hear, and he grew even redder. 'Insolent whelp!' he barked.

'Mother, you may visit us whenever you like,' Henry added.

The footman returned, his eyes wide as he looked from Henry to the Duke in a state of silent anxiety.

‘Is it ready?’ Henry asked him.

‘It is, Lord Linwood,’ the footman replied with a bow.

‘Capital,’ Henry said. ‘Good night Mother. Good night, Your Grace. I intend to return Miss Read to her home and I shall see you both tomorrow, I daresay. We leave for Linwood in two days.’

The Duke sputtered impotently and the Duchess held a handkerchief to her nose and mouth, weeping. Henry gave her a little smile, his father a short bow, and then he placed a hand on the small of Rosalind’s back, leading her out of the door. His heart was thudding hard against his ribs, his blood rushing unpleasantly.

For the second time that night the outside air was like a salve to his emotions. He inhaled deeply, then met Rosalind’s grey eyes. This alone was enough to lift his spirits.

‘I say,’ he breathed. ‘That went well.’

She raised her eyebrows and smirked, then nodded. ‘Oh yes. Very smoothly.’

‘We should get you home, I think,’ Henry said, smiling back. ‘You need your rest, for you and your Mama shall have a long journey ahead of you.’

‘And a great deal of packing to do,’ Rosalind said as he led her to where the gig awaited.

‘I shall send some servants along tomorrow. And you shall need a lady’s maid.’

‘Oh,’ Rosalind gasped, her eyes widening as her footsteps faltered.

‘Is something the matter?’

‘’Tis only that…it has been four years since I had any such assistance. I never thought to have a lady’s maid again.’

Henry’s smile widened. ‘Your life is on the verge of changing, once again, Miss Read. You must prepare yourself for the adjustment.’

‘I suspect this adjustment shall prove far more pleasant than the last,’ Rosalind said.

‘I do hope so,’ Henry said, and took her in his arms, kissing her again.

‘Mama, where is your bonnet? I hung it on the peg just last night!’ Rosalind said two days later as she flew about the cottage, putting last minute items in the one trunk with space remaining. ‘Henry shall arrive at any moment, and we shan’t be ready.’

‘I have the bonnet here, ja,’ said Oma, coming into the parlour from Mrs. Read’s bedchamber.

A knock came on the front door and Rosalind’s heart echoed it with a racing rhythm. She hastened to open it, but ’twas not Henry.

‘Eira, did you succeed?’ Rosalind said, clasping her hands before her as if in prayer.

‘Indeed, I did,’ Eira said, lifting up the large, closed basket. ‘Mr. Aristotle is quite a fiendish gundiguts and no easy one to catch, I declare!’

‘That’s the last of them, ja?’ Oma asked.

‘Yes,’ Rosalind confirmed with delight. ‘We’ve Hera, Hippolyta, and Socrates in baskets just outside the kitchen.’

‘I shall put Aristotle with the rest,’ Eira said, crossing the room with the large basket held high.

Rosalind remained where she was with her hands clasped together. Her heart was so full of joy, she wanted simply to savor the moment.

Oma and Eira would come along to Linwood. Eira would act as Rosalind's lady's maid and companion, and Oma as Mrs. Read's nurse. But more than that, they were as much a part of Rosalind's family as Mama. She had feared to be parted from them, but when they agreed to the plan, she felt that truly her dreams were fulfilled.

'There's a pair of carriages!' Eira exclaimed, hurrying back into the parlour.

Rosalind went to the window. ''Tis Henry!'

After that, all was a tumult of activity as the footmen came and began loading all of their things. They tied Snowdrop, the goat, to follow one of the grooms who would be riding, and Buttercup, Eira's pony, went with another. Oma and Rosalind helped Mrs. Read to be settled, and Henry grabbed Rosalind about the waist and spun her around, laughing merrily, before they joined the rest of the passengers within the carriages.

'I never believed this would really happen,' Rosalind said to Henry, Eira, and Henry's man Phillips, who shared her carriage, as she looked out of the window. Her happiness was tinged with regret to leave the forest she had grown to love so much.

'Yes, I must own this turn of events was quite unexpected for me, also,' Eira agreed. Rosalind frowned a little as she gazed at her friend. Eira's cheeks, usually like alabaster, had a rosy tint. Eira glanced quickly and shyly at Phillips from time to time.

Phillips, for his part, was smiling broadly at everyone.

Henry seemed amused as well, and his amber eyes twinkled as he met Rosalind's.

'A very happy turn of events, indeed,' Rosalind laughed.

And soon, they were off.

Chapter 30

Linwood Manor was not as large or as grand as Corrach Manor, Rosalind conceded, but she loved it far more, from the very first moment she laid eyes on it as their carriage went up the twisting drive that wound almost for a mile. The Jacobean main house was pale grey stone, with tall chimneys and ivy tinged red by the season.

Its size and simplicity met with Eira's approval, as well, which pleased Rosalind inordinately.

The peripheral buildings varied in age, from the newer stables built in the previous century to the older outbuildings, which included a smokehouse, an orangery, and dovecote. Many of these were falling down, and Henry suggested they be demolished entirely.

'Good heavens, no!' cried Rosalind. 'What a dreadful idea. We must restore them all, and keep to the old styles as best we may.'

Henry grinned. 'It pleases me greatly that this is your preference, for 'tis mine, as well.'

The little stone chapel at Linwood was the oldest building on the estate, built in the twelfth century. Ivy covered more than half of it and the roof needed some mending. The cats seemed to like the chapel and lurked about it as though they considered it theirs. Rosalind took to bringing their dinner there in the evenings.

It reminded Rosalind a great deal of the gamekeeper's cottage in the forest of Corrach Manor, where she had fallen in love with Henry. 'Twas a perfect place for the wedding, as a result.

Over the course of a few days after they arrived at Linwood, Rosalind,

Eira, and Oma explored the grounds of the estate. Oma pointed to plants she recognized and named them, quizzing the young ladies as to their medicinal properties. Several times, however, the older lady stopped and peered at a plant or mushroom with curiosity. Linwood was on the eastern side of England, and farther to the north than Corrach. There was more fog and rain, and much of the vegetation differed. Oma was fascinated, and her enthusiasm inspired Rosalind, as well. Eira still had little interest in the outdoors, but she was happy to go along, just to spend time with her mother and near-sister.

Eira sewed a wedding gown for Rosalind, using fine silk fabric stored in a mahogany wardrobe at Linwood for a generation, which they discovered after Henry employed a new housekeeper and the ladies explored the whole house with her. The silk was a brocade, primarily cream in colour but with wine-red flora designs. Eira gleefully produced her favorite fashion plates, ordered from London, and began to work on an exquisite gown trimmed with burgundy ribbon and Spanish lace, also acquired from the same wardrobe. Meanwhile, Rosalind, Henry, and Oma tended to Mrs. Read, helping her become familiar with her new surroundings.

This time of preparation for the wedding was both lovely and vexing for Rosalind. She wished to savor it, for 'twas a very special time and most unusual, she recognized. However, it required her to wait to share a bedchamber with her beloved Henry. Her impatience to become his wife at long last blossomed into bittersweet yearning as the preparations continued.

For his part, Henry muttered that they might have done better to elope, though underneath his growling he did not begrudge the ladies their work in readying everything. Indeed, Henry had much to occupy his time, as well. Padrig, the gardener, had come along with them, and Henry spent several hours each day riding around the grounds with him to discuss what needed to be done to restore Linwood.

Over the years only a few staff had remained at the estate, so many more must be hired. This alone was a challenging task, and demanded much of Henry's time.

‘I am pleased you convinced the Weiss ladies to join us,’ Henry told Rosalind one evening as they sat in the parlour after dining. ‘That saves me the trouble of filling two positions, at least!’

Rosalind chuckled. ‘I am the fortunate one,’ she said. ‘Oma is such a skilled caretaker, I feel most confident that Mama is in good hands, and of course no one could be a better companion to me than Eira.’

She assisted Henry in hiring a new cook, after delighting in tasting several dishes presented by half a dozen hopefuls, and with this addition to the staff and her gown completed, at last it was time for the wedding to take place.

With Oma and Eira, Rosalind set about gathering flowers to decorate for the wedding. Together they wove wild roses and purple heather into wreaths, made garlands of silk ribbon and bishop’s lace flowers, and filled the large, stone vases inside the chapel with bouquets of a combination of all of these.

On the morning of the wedding, Eira assisted Rosalind in dressing, helping her on with the lovely gown she had made for her. The dark red brocade against cream silk reflected Rosalind’s own coloring. Eira had made a crown of bifloral hawthorn in full bloom, the blossoms creamy white with garnet anthers, a perfect complement to the gown.

‘Hawthorn is very good luck for marriages,’ Oma said, beaming at Rosalind as Eira finished with her hair. ‘It drives away strife and brings love and hope. A blessing in the form of flowers, ja?’

‘Oh, Oma, I would have thought you would tell me the effect of taking hawthorn in a tonic!’ laughed Rosalind.

‘But of course, *meine Perle*,’ Oma smiled. ‘There is no surprise there. Hawthorn strengthens the heart.’

At last Rosalind was ready. Everyone else waited at the chapel, the

elderly minister of the nearest town at the altar, looking somewhat surprised to be there. Rosalind appeared in the archway, her heart fluttering as she took her first step down the aisle, Eira and Oma on either side of her.

Her mother watched from the first row, her face peaceful, although her eyes seemed a bit confused. Still, she smiled as she gazed at Rosalind.

For an instant, Rosalind felt a pang of sadness that Bertie was not there, followed by a larger wave of grief at the absence of her father.

Then she looked at the man who stood with the minister at the altar.

Her grief subsided; not gone, but soothed, as she met Henry's amber eyes.

Phillips had done his very best to tame Henry's wild brown locks, but their unruliness was still apparent. He wore a burgundy velvet coat and a brocade neckcloth that matched her gown, and Rosalind knew Eira had helped choose these elements of his attire. Henry was smiling at Rosalind, a radiant joy lighting his face. She returned the smile, her own heart overflowing.

Everything else faded away as she neared him. Her eyes were fixed on his, and he became her whole world. She knew he felt the same way. The service passed as though it happened very far away. All she felt was the sensation of his hands holding hers, and the elation of standing close to him, looking into his eyes.

'I do,' he said in that low rumble of a voice she loved so dearly.

'And do you, Miss Rosalind Agnes Read, take Lord Linwood...' intoned the minister, and the words 'I do' were already bubbling up before the fellow had finished his admonitions.

‘Yes, yes, I do,’ she said, and Henry smiled at her, and the minister was prattling again, but it didn’t matter, because Henry pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Together at last, and we shall never part!

Her heart sang with happiness, and as Henry held her tighter, she heard a bear-like growl from his throat, and then he was grinning at her and laughing, and she laughed merrily as well.

‘Oh, dearest Henry,’ she said, full of elation, ‘how happy I am! To think, just two months ago, I might never have imagined any of this! How my fortunes changed!’

‘And mine as well,’ Henry agreed, still grinning. ‘I never foresaw any of this. And I have a fall from a horse to thank!’

They laughed together again, and then, arm and arm, walked back down the aisle and out of the chapel.

Epilogue

Much of the house was in need of restoration, but there were not very many guests at Linwood after the service, so 'twas not difficult to remain in the rooms in better condition. There were only the residents, which included Henry and Rosalind, Mrs. Read, Oma and Eira, and the staff, and several personages from the environs, who would be their neighbors now, and Rosalind had insisted on inviting, to start their interactions with them well.

The new cook had made grilled fish and roast pheasant, soup, buttered Bath buns and sponge cakes. There was wine, cider, and port, and everyone became merry. They rolled back the carpet and Mrs. Read played reel after reel on the pianoforte, as the revelers danced for hours. Henry insisted that Padrig and Phillips and the rest of the staff join them, and Phillips danced with Eira twice, much to the glee of Rosalind, who teased her blushing friend rather mercilessly.

At last, feeling warm from dancing and port, Rosalind gazed into Henry's eyes. He smiled at her, and slipped an arm around her waist. They bid goodnight to the rest, and made their way to the bedchamber they would share. Rosalind's heart was full of joy, though she also felt a little short of breath in anticipation.

As soon as they reached the threshold of their bedchamber, Henry grabbed her by the waist, kissing her with playful exhilaration. 'My wife!' he exclaimed, smiling.

'My husband,' she replied with a breathless laugh, her heart bubbling with happiness.

Henry kissed her again, and she returned the kiss, reveling in the sensation of his soft lips. She fell against him, and he held her with firm strength. Then he guided them both into the room and shut the door.

Sighing gladly, Rosalind turned to offer him the back of her gown. Laced up with ribbon, Henry made quick work of undoing it. The bodice loosened, and soon she could push it down and step free of it. That left her stays and her chemise, and the newlyweds rid themselves of both, as well as Henry's clothing.

They stood together in the candlelight, nude, gazing at each other in wonder and desire. Rosalind blushed under Henry's gaze, but her eyes traveled over the sculpted muscles of his legs, his belly, his chest and arms...yearning to feel his body against hers. She looked at his arousal, licking her lips with nervous anticipation. Because of her studies with Oma, she knew a good deal more about the act of love than most unmarried girls of her class, but she had no personal experience of it.

'Are you frightened, my love? We may wait if you prefer,' Henry said. 'There is no reason for haste...'

'No, I do not wish to wait.'

At that Henry's smile widened, and he reached for her, placing his hands on her hips and pulling her close. The warmth of his body was enchanting, and just as it had before, when he first held her in the clearing, she felt her own body slacken in a most unexpected way. 'Twas as though their bodies knew each other, and knew they belonged together.

Henry ran his fingers from her hips up her back, enjoying the silky texture of her skin. Rosalind pressed her forehead against his shoulder, closing her eyes, focusing on the sensation. Her body felt vibrant, her skin electric under his touch.

Kissing her mouth, he held her close, his hands cupping her bottom. Never had anyone touched her this way before, and she delighted in it. She felt she could trust Henry completely, and the joy of this union overwhelmed her.

As he finished the kiss he stepped back, then began to run a hand from her cheek, to her throat, to her collarbone, then gently over her breast. His eyes followed his hand with reverence.

Emboldened, Rosalind stroked his chest, enjoying the firm planes, the indented abdomen, the curve of the belly as she caressed lower. Tentatively, she touched his erection, smiling as he sighed into her hair. How extraordinary to have the ability to give him pleasure! She loved the very idea.

After another long kiss, Henry guided her to the bed, and they settled themselves upon it. They proceeded with joy and sensual indulgence to explore each others' bodies, stroking, kissing, and tasting. Rosalind had never imagined love might be like this. She was amazed and elated.

At last Henry positioned himself between her legs, gazing at her as he pressed his tip to her. 'You must tell me to stop, if you suffer,' he said with concern.

'I promise,' she said.

Slowly, he entered her. Rosalind inhaled, the sensation strange and uncomfortable. But the deeper he went, spreading her with his girth, the better it felt. As he began to move, carefully at first, the pleasure increased.

'Oh, Henry,' she breathed.

'Are you well?' he asked.

'More than well,' she said. 'Pray, do not stop.'

And so he allowed himself more intensity, and began to thrust with rhythm, always watching her for any sign of pain. Rosalind felt only growing bliss, however.

My love. My husband. I shall be like this with you always.

Her rapture mounted, increasing far beyond what she thought possible, until at last it rippled outward in a sudden burst. She cried out, arching her back as her body seemed to shatter, her spirit quaking with ecstasy. Henry cried out as well, and held her tighter. They rocked together. Rosalind felt she was flying free, beyond the bed, beyond the room, beyond the house itself. She was in the sky.

As she returned to herself, she felt Henry's arms wrapped around her. She was warm, and safe, and she felt wonderful.

Laughing softly, she kissed him.

'Was—that is to say, are you—?' he stammered.

'Why, I am so very, very happy, Henry,' she replied.

He gave her a relieved smile, and she kissed him again.

'I think I should like to have another go,' she whispered. 'What say you?'

Henry was amenable.

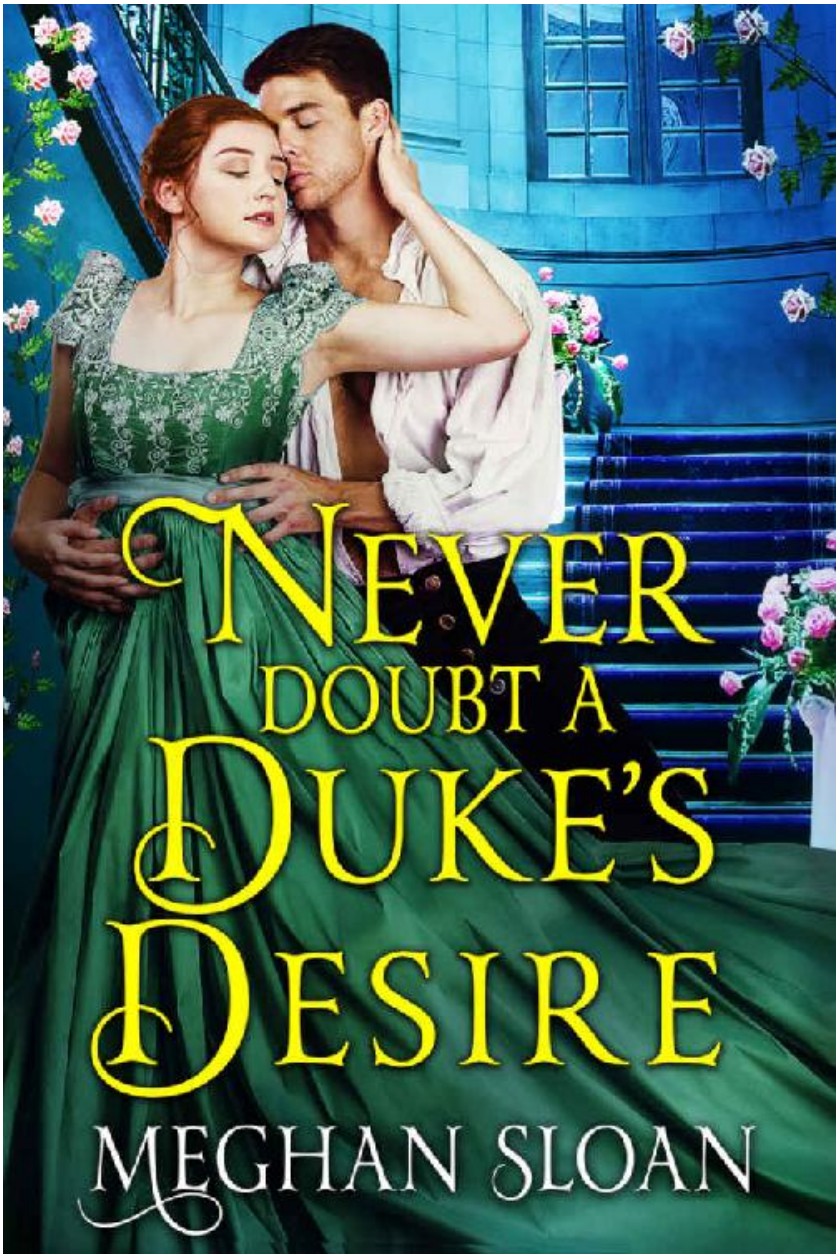
THE END

Can't get enough of Rosalind and Henry? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://meghansloan.com/matilda

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"Never Doubt a Duke's Desire"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


NEVER
DOUBT A
DUKE'S
DESIRE
MEGHAN SLOAN

Never Doubt a Duke's Desire

Introduction

Alone in the world, young orphan Louisa Stone learned her life lessons the hard way. Abandoned as a child, she had survived the harshness of poverty and a struggling country orphanage. Now, with her painful past behind her and her present in the home of the reclusive Duke of Westwood, Louisa wants nothing more than a quiet, invisible life. What she never expected, though, was the Duke to be so seductive that her temptation would be irresistible. Before she even realises it, a single touch sparks an attraction she had never expected to feel, and his scorching kisses burn like fire. Her body can't say no to this alluring, perfect man, but is she ready to risk everything in the name of undeniable love?

While struggling with pain of his own, Isaac Montagu, the Duke of Westwood, had withdrawn from society. After a series of crushing losses and devastating heartbreaks, he has given up any hope for love. Everything is about to change forever, though, when he first meets Miss Stone, a brilliant and stunning woman. At that moment, he realises that his determination to be alone might not hold for too long, as he is utterly mesmerised by her and a fire starts deep inside his chest. At their first kiss, his walls start to crumble and the more they are together, the more his long-buried desire to love and be loved is reignited. After all he's been through, will she be the one to save him from his misery or is he condemned to live in pain forever?

As Louisa draws out the person Isaac had hidden from the world for years, an old love comes back into Isaac's life, asking for a second chance. Afraid, and on the verge of dual heartbreak, Louisa and Isaac will face an inevitable dilemma; was their bond forged on the fragile connection of two lonely souls finding comfort, or could their desire turn into an everlasting love? Can they withstand the pressure mounting against them, or will they abandon one another once and for all?

Chapter 1

South London

Montagu Estate

1813

“Miss Stone,” the stern voice of the housekeeper, Mrs. Wickham had the young maid’s head darting up in attention. “We need your help in the dining room.”

Occupied with dusting the spare rooms of Duke Westwood’s house, Louisa Stone, one of the newest maids, had not been expecting any interruption until she had to retire for the day. Turning to the older woman, she curtsied, “Yes, Mrs. Wickham.”

Tall and thin, Mrs. Wickham gave her a curt nod and then walked away, the tails of her dark dress a contrast to the silver of her tight bun. Nervously, Louisa repacked her basket with her dusting cloths and left the room. She stashed the basket in a storage closet on that floor and then went to the dining room.

She hoped her white apron was not smudged or her hat askew as she took the servant staircase to get to the dining hall. Having only been employed for a scant three weeks, Louisa had only passed through the dining room twice, but the room never failed to steal her breath.

Pots overflowing with luxuriant foliage and crystal chandeliers endowed the room with opulence, and the hall made Louisa feel slightly overwhelmed. Overhead, two-tiered chandeliers winked with hundreds of cut crystal teardrops, and damask wallpaper covered the

walls. The long rosewood table was being covered with a delicate lace cloth, and she spotted the silver candleholders ready to be placed along its length.

“Oh, Miss Stone,” another maid said. “Please, fetch the silver from the butler and begin setting the table.”

With a quick reply, Louisa headed off to the butler’s cupboard just in time to find Mr. Oswald opening it. “Miss Stone, good afternoon. His Grace is only entertaining for one tonight, so only two sets of cutleries.”

“Only two?” Louisa asked before catching herself and ducked her head while her face reddened. “Pardon me; that was not my place.”

The Butler laughed, “No need, Miss Stone. His close friend Lord Ashford is visiting him from his travels. From what I understand, they went to Cambridge together.”

Louisa had assembled the cutlery she needed on a velvet tray while he spoke. She thanked Mr. Oswald and went back to the dining hall. The candlesticks had been placed, and so had the place settings, and she only needed to lay the silver.

Painstakingly, she set the forks, knives, and spoons on the napkins, one set at the table's head and the other to the side. Louisa was flummoxed as to why they would use a fourteen-foot table if there were only two diners, but again, it was not her place to question.

While setting the last fork down, she happened to glance up at the

staircase beyond, and there, on the landing, framed by tall bow windows, Duke Westwood stood—in his shirtsleeves. The stark white of his shirt stood out against the dark grey of his waistcoat as he gazed out into the lawn beyond.

His profile showed a chiseled jaw and chin, a high cheekbone, a defined nose, and thick, windswept dark hair that framed his face, sculpted with fierce perfection. Louisa was not sure how old he was, but he looked to be in his early thirties, and she stood and stared, mesmerized.

When he turned, her head snapped away, and she fixed the already perfect setting with her heart lodged somewhere in her throat. No written rule stated she could not look at her employer, but she was sure that staring was not allowed.

Though she had never met him before, she had heard whispers about him; that he was not one to engage with others, was not one to go out of his way to meet others or to draw attention to himself.

He was not rude; he was a solitary, solemn man. A few of the maids and footmen held it that he thought everyone other than those of his class was beneath him, but she was not going to jump to that conclusion.

What she did see—and she cautioned herself for thinking it—was a lonely man, one very used to his privacy. She ducked her head and fussed with the silver though she did not need to.

He is very handsome, though.

She lifted the velvet tray and turned but stopped short as the Duke was behind her. Instantly, her ears started ringing, and her teeth felt grafted together. Dimly she was aware that he had asked her something—but heaven help her if she knew what it was.

Louisa knew she was looking like a fool before the man as her heart threatened to burst through her ribs. His eyes, dark brown and arresting, narrowed while his thick brown brows arched.

Is he waiting for me to say something?

“I apologize, Your Grace,” she managed to utter. “I did not hear that.”

His eyes roamed across her face, with a particular look one would have if one were looking at something strange, “Who are you?”

Her fingers tightened around the tray, and her knuckles went white, “L-Louisa Stone, Your Grace. Mrs. Wickham employed me over a sennight ago.”

“Has she now,” he muttered, and Louisa’s skin prickled with gooseflesh as the Duke’s gaze roved over her. His suddenly intense eyes seemed to bore into her layer by layer. Shivers gripped her already fluttering heart.

No one—no man—had ever looked at her so intently before, and she felt exposed and bared. She had to tip her chin up a little as the man stood nearly a foot over her but knew it was only suitable for her to duck her eyes with reverence. However, he had asked her a question,

and she felt it rude to keep her eyes down.

She swallowed. “Is there something I may help you with, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” he said, “There has been a sudden change in plans. Instead of hosting one, I am hosting three. Please get more tableware for my guests.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” she said, then inched away.

It was only when she was in the hallway that Louisa dared to breathe. She managed to find Mr. Oswald for more silverware sets and tableware and set them correctly. The Duke was not there anymore, and she was able to do her job, but what worried her was the chance that His Grace was talking to Mrs. Wickham about her.

Was he giving the woman orders to relieve her of her duties? Her hands trembled a little at the thought—but what reason would have to fire her? It had taken her a long while and a tough road to get to this placement, and if she were sent away, the only place she would end up was in the workhouse, as she had nothing much to her name.

She fixed the plates, and the candelabras, before she left to the servants' dining hall and ate her dinner, then slipped out into the back garden to use the few moments of private time she was given.

She did it every evening, as the sunset beyond the hills was breathtaking. The large swathes of orange and dark pink were beautiful to look at and peaceful at the same time.

Taking a seat on one of the wooden benches, Louisa looked around and could only feel grateful that she had ended up here, in a respectable household instead of a shoddy workhouse or a brothel. Most women like her, parentless and penniless, found it hard to rise up above their disadvantaged situation and became courtesans and mistresses.

A few she did know had been fortunate to find sponsors and become governesses and lady's maids and companions, but they were rare. At least she had a roof over her head, food to eat, and she was working. A few things were out of her reach, like having a relationship or being independent, but she was content.

Louisa could not count the times when she had almost fallen into despair about how bleak her future was. But in those darkest moments, she had promised herself that no matter what, her unfortunate beginnings were not going to be permanent.

The sun was dipping, so she stood and left for the house. She slipped into the manor to meander her way through the back hallways to get to the kitchen. Surely, they needed hands in the back to wash something or plate up something, but when cook handed her a spotless apron to don and a pitcher of water to serve the guests, Louisa felt terrified.

"Just stand quietly at the side and wait for someone to call on you," cook advised, then directed her out into the dining hall. Louisa managed to enter the room without any attention directed to her and stood at the side with another maid.

His Grace's guests were another Lord and two Ladies, one older than

the other with her grey hair in a graceful chignon and a strand of lovely pearls around her neck. The younger Lady had her blond hair in beautiful ringlets and wore a stunning peach dress, while the Lord had duskier blond hair and merry blue eyes.

He was debating about something with His Grace while swirling his glass of wine. “I’m telling you, Montagu, this business is going to take off with you or without you.”

The Duke gave a derisive snort. “Manufacturing lighter phaetons for racing is not my idea of wealth-gaining, Langley, all I would be doing is sending foolish men to their deaths.”

The Lord laughed. “This coming from a man who used to volunteer to be someone’s second in shooting matches? A man who used to race on Rotten Row?”

“That man is dead,” Duke Westwood said, then pointedly added, “He grew up and grew wiser; I wish I could say the same for you.”

“Is that a jab at Whites and me?” Mister Langley asked, his brow cocked up.

“*Whites*? On no, how about: Brooks, Boodle’s, Beefsteak, the Athenium Club, the Four-in-Hand—” Duke Westwood began ticking off his finger, causing Lord Langley to rush and beg him to stop.

“All right, all right, my good man. No need to be airing my affairs for all and sundry,” Lord Langley waved him off.

“I take affront to classing me, your mother, and your sister as all and sundry, William,” the dignified lady said while touching her pearls. “Where are your sensibilities, William?”

“In the gutter where his manners are,” the younger lady said.

“Liliana!” their mother said, aghast. “For shame.”

Duke Westwood looked amused, and the slight curve of his lips showed it. “Do not bother yourself too much, Lady Elizabeth; we are all familiar with their sibling love, however disturbing it is.”

“I must declare,” the older woman said. “I need some water.”

Nervously, Louisa came to the older women’s side and painstakingly poured out the water. She could feel the Duke’s eyes on the side of her head and skimming over her, but she managed to fill the glass and step away without any accidents. She rejoined the two maids at the side while her heart beat out of rhythm in her breastbone.

She kept her eyes on her feet while feeling—again—Duke Westwood’s eyes on her, but she would never dare meet his gaze. She would not make the mistake from earlier when she had matched his eyes and could only count the moments until the dinner ended.

When the dinner ended, Mrs. Wickham led the guests to their rooms, and the Duke dismissed them, Louisa moved away quickly. She hurried to the kitchen to put the pitcher away, say her goodnights,

then hurried off to her rooms.

She closed the door of her modest room and sank to the bed. Duke Westwood's gaze was unnerving and sent some upsetting and quivering sensations into her stomach. Pressing a hand to her chest, Louisa sucked in a few stabilizing breaths.

What was Duke Westwood's gaze doing to her, and even worse, what did he see when he looked at her?

Chapter 2

The faint pink-golden rays of dawn were breaking through the window of Isaac's bedchamber, where, instead of sitting up in his bed, he was slumped into one of his padded chairs and swirling the dredges of his coffee.

Last night had just been another sleepless one in a line of dozens before it. It was not nightmares or worries that had kept him awake but rather emptiness. There were nights when his chest felt empty, cold, and lifeless, and he knew where it all stemmed from—*her*; Miss Helen Follet, the woman who had broken his heart into splinters.

A year and six months had passed since the moment he had caught his ex-betrothed in another man's arms. Seeing her pull away from his kiss, every hope about having a happy marriage with her had vanished. He knew that he should have rebounded from it, but the passing time had not healed his wounds. The hollowness in his heart was a testament to how she had reached into his chest and ripped his heart away from his breastbone.

Rubbing his eyes, Isaac's mind flitted to the young maid, Louisa Stone. He wondered how he had never seen her before, as she had been employed at his home for nearly a month. The tint of her auburn hair was a shade he had never seen before—it looked strewed through with a touch of light brown and seemed to shimmer brassy under the light.

Her slender heart-shaped face was unadorned with pigments, but it was far from plain. She had a charming button nose, creamy cheeks, a small dimple in a quaint little chin, and plump, pale coral lips. It was still bewildering to him how he had not seen her before—but then, he had no sensible reason to be admiring her; she was only a maid.

Standing, Isaac tightened his banyan tie and rang for bathing water. William and his family were there until the afternoon where they would have luncheon, and then they would off to Drury Lane for a play. It was his task to entertain them until they went off—and somehow, just the notion of it felt unbearably hard.

Living in solitude was what he was best at, and for the past year and a half, he had sequestered himself away from the *beau monde*. Isaac was positive that somehow along the way, he had forgotten how one would entertain guests.

However, if history served them well, he would only be engaging William. He supposed if he left William to keep talking and plying him with wine, he would not be made to do much. Lady Langley was one to sleep to noon, and then, she and her mother gossiped over tea.

The footmen came in with the water and filled the copper tub in the adjacent bathing chamber, and he sank into the water, rested his head on the lip, and laid an arm along its edge. Bitterly, he wondered what had become of Helena, if she had married the Frenchman and had run away to the continent.

At least she does not know that I am a Duke now; I had kept that part of my life away from her for a reason, and now I know I had thought right.

Shaking the unsettling thought away, Isaac bathed and shaved before going back to the bedchamber to dress. His wardrobe had become a bit monochrome, with only dark grays and black suits. He knew that sitting beside William, who had become somewhat of a dandy with his embroidered velvet and pink waistcoats, he would look as somber as his soul felt.

But he did not have the will to care how strange he would look; William knew his condition of those days when he felt miserable and despondent, but lately, William had been trying to drag him out his rut. Isaac was not ignorant of his friend's sudden visit's underlying reason. William would try and cajole him into showing his face in social gatherings.

But Isaac had a flat answer for him—no. He was going to let the man do his best, though, and when he had tired himself out, Isaac would assure him that he did not care for *le bon ton*. He tied his cravat and pinned it, something he had learned to do during the days he had shuttered himself from the world.

Leaving the dark bedchamber, he crossed the stairs' landing and towards the breakfast room with the same open spaces and glass doors like a solarium. It was smaller than the dining hall and faced the central garden and the lawns beyond it, and that somehow diminished the feeling of loneliness when he dined alone.

Soon, William would be joining him over coffee and crumpets, looking dapper and cheerful enough to outshine the sun. The newspaper was laid on the shorter oval table, and while he sent for the table to set, he shook it out.

There was news about the wars overseas in France, about a ship of criminals sent off to New Holland, and more laws the Prince Regent was putting into effect.

"If you scowl any harder, your face will be set that way," William teased from the doorway.

Turning a page, Isaac replied, “Good morning to you too, Langley. How was your night?”

“Wonderful,” the Marquess of Ashford replied while taking his seat. “And yours?”

“Middling,” Isaac replied while turning another page.

“You didn’t sleep a wink, did you?” William asked, and before Isaac could reply, the maids came in with their morning meals.

They greeted both Lords, then set the food on the table, poured out both cups of coffee, and with curtsies, left. Isaac set the paper down to pick up his cup and sipped it while William let his sit for a moment.

“You have not answered me, Montagu,” he said. “Did you, or did you not sleep?”

Isaac muttered over the rim of the cup, “What difference is there?”

“None to me but to you,” William replied. “Just tell me honestly; did you rest or not?”

Tired, Isaac rested the cup down and rubbed his brow, “No, I did not sleep; is it so obvious?”

“To me, yes,” William replied. “I remember how you were from Cambridge and the days when you would stumble into Mister Farnham’s looking half-dead from studying all night. It is sort of the same look, only now, instead of you having dark circles under your eyes, there is a vein that sticks out on your forehead that tells me you have not slept.”

Reaching out for his cup, Isaac shook his head, “Is there a point? I’m plagued with sleeplessness from time to time, and I’ve accepted that, but you should not worry about my affairs.”

William leaned forward and braced his forearms on the table, “You’re wrong; I worry about you all the while. I fear that you’re cutting yourself off, and I would hate for you to become a hermit.”

Skimming his eyes over the toasted bread, coddled eggs, sausages, and diced fruit with little hunger, he replied, “I am not a hermit.”

“Really?” William pressed, his warm eyes now getting sharp, “When was the last time you went to an assembly hall? A theatre play? A musicale? When was the last time you set foot into Whites? Went hunting?”

“Theatre plays are from books that I'd rather read, musicals are tedious, White’s is only more of the same, one drinks, and one plays cards. And you know the abhorrence I have for hunting,” Isaac replied.

“What about women, courtship, marriage?” William pressed. “By God, man, you have a life. If you sequester yourself away, you’re only going

to survive? Life should be lived to the fullest, Montagu."

"Perhaps," Isaac said. "That man used to find fulfillment in such actives, but that part of me died eighteen months ago. We all sacrifice something, Langley. A social life was not that much to give up when I realized that my duties took precedence. I grew self-reliant and responsible, and it shows. The Dukedom has never been more prosperous."

While William fixed his plate, he asked. "The Dukedom might be, but are you? At this point, I think you have it set in your mind to live and die alone."

Putting his finished cup away, Isaac asked, "And what is so terrible about that notion?"

Faltering with his fork halfway to his mouth, William gaped, "W-What is so terrible? Have you lost your mind, man? Women are god's gift to humankind, and you are going to dismiss it just because some woman betrayed you? She is the one who did the wrong, not you!"

He felt no urge to eat and folded his arms across his chest; his eyes dropped to half-mast. "I was invested in the relationship. You know that."

"And you can be again," William pressed, "There is a late summer ball at Lady Crossgrove's estate. Come with me. I promise you it will not be horrible. Some of the season's best debutants will be there."

Scoffing, Isaac reached for the paper, "Naïve ingénues? What in the

world would I do with such a lady?"

"You can start to believe that not all women are unfaithful and treacherous," William said. "And with some hope, one will catch your eye, and you will consider courting."

Shaking the paper out, Isaac said, "Stop putting the cart before the horse."

"Will you come?" William asked.

Folding a corner of the paper down, Isaac dourly said, "You will not stop asking, will you?"

"No," William replied, his eyebrows inching up in expectancy.

Grimacing at the thought of being around the crème-de-la-crème of London and being judged by them, Isaac replied, "I have one stipulation about this; if I go, you will not ask me to attend another."

"You are going then," William grinned.

"I did not say *that*," Isaac stressed. "You must agree to my condition before I give you my final answer."

Reaching for his napkin, William wiped his mouth. "Since I already

know the answer, yes, I agree not to pressure you into another ball until you are ready to do it yourself."

"And what makes you think that will happen?" Isaac's lips downturned.

"Because when you realize what you have been missing for over a year, you will crave it like no other," William said triumphantly.

The door was pulled open, and both his and William's head snapped to it, only for him to see Louisa jerk in her step. She was holding an empty tray, and instantly her face went flaming red. "I-I am so sorry, Your Grace, and My Lord, I was sent thinking that you h-had finished. I apologize, p-please excuse me."

She curtsied and scurried away from the door, closing in with a quick snap, and slowly, Isaac turned to William. It took a moment for what just happened to sink, and the image of her vivid blushing cheeks stirred something inside him.

"Hmmm," William said while turning his head away. "What a peculiar little mouse."

Somehow, Isaac found the moniker both insulting and fitting for Louisa, but he could not deal with that issue then. "All right, Langley, I will go to this ball of yours."

"Great," William nodded. "You will not regret it, I promise you."

“I think you forgot to add, and may God have mercy upon my soul,” Isaac dryly added.

Chapter 3

Oh no! Oh no! What have I done!

Hurrying back down to the kitchens, Louisa tried her best not to trip over her feet in her rush. She had just barged into the Duke and his guest's private conversation like a bull.

The memory of both shocked faces stayed with her, and the sinking sensation that she had probably gained a reason for the Duke to dismiss her sank her stomach to her feet. First, she had brazenly looked him in the eye, and now, she had run into his private conversation. If those were not grounds for dismissal, she did not know what was.

She wanted to find the darkest closest and hide, but she could not. As calmly as she could, she went back to the empty kitchen and rested the tray there. The best she could do was find a room in the farthest reaches of the manor to clean and hide away.

Hopefully, His Grace will be more occupied with his guests and pay no attention to me. I cannot lose his placement.

Louisa was almost at the doorway when Cook Morna asked, "Miss Stone, is His Grace not finished?"

She turned, "No, His Grace and his guest are not finished."

Nodding, Cook Morna turned and headed back to the pantry while Louisa hurried off, praying with everything inside her that His Grace would not say anything to Mrs. Wickham.

She made to hurry off to the left-wing of the manor house that always needed cleaning, but a ringing in the kitchen stopped her. Cook Morna looked at the bell and said, “It’s the breakfast room, Miss Stone. I think you will need to go back there.”

Fear settled into Louisa’s stomach like a rock, but she nodded, “Yes, Miss Morna.”

Taking the tray, she set back upstairs with heavy feet, but she could not linger and got to the door—this time, she knocked and waited for the Duke’s sharp command to enter. She went inside to see His Grace alone, and he was folding his newspaper.

“I truly apologize for my mistake earlier, Your Grace,” she said nervously. “I did not realize that you and your guest were still inside.”

He stared at her, long enough for her knees to start feeling weak; she felt nailed to the square of floor that she stood on and internally begged the Duke to say something—anything.

“Please sit, Miss Stone,” he said.

No—no! Please, don’t dismiss me!

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said while folding her skirt and taking a seat. Her eyes dipped to her lap, and her heart threatened to leap out of her chest while waiting for him to speak.

“I have not had a chance to speak with Mrs. Wickham lately, but I feel that I do not need to. Instead, I would prefer to hear my questions answered by you. How old are you, Miss Stone?”

Louisa blinked, “I am one-and-twenty, Your Grace.”

“Where did you come from?” he asked. “And please, look at me when you answer me.”

Lifting her head, Louisa said, “Lady Gershom’s Orphanage for Girls in South London, Your Grace. I left the hostel a year ago because they were short of helpers, and I was temporarily employed as a teacher and helper for the youngest children.”

His head slanted. “What did you teach?”

“Reading and basic arithmetic,” Louisa replied. “I helped them bathe, taught them prayers, and read to them before they went to bed.”

He cocked a foot over his other knee and rested his arm on the chair’s wooden arm. “How did you find me?”

“Lady Gresham goes out of her way to search for employment

opportunities for her best dependents, and she found your house, Your Grace," Louisa replied, then the worry inside her shattered her calm, "I have nowhere in London to go to. I need to stay here. Please do not dismiss me. I will do anything to—'

He lifted a hand to stop her, and Louisa's mouth shut so quickly that her mouth clicked.

"I am not going to dismiss you, Miss Stone, not unless you give me a reason to. I sense that you are young and zealous, and I applaud you, but I feel that you are constantly looking over your shoulder, expecting one mistake to ring doom for you. Why so restlessly vigilant?"

Because I know how cruel people of the higher class can be against people like me, penniless orphans.

"I—"

"Isaac, dear, are you—" The older lady from last night came in, then stopped. "—oh, pardon me."

"No need. Miss Stone, may I introduce Lady Deborah Langley, Dowager Marchioness of Ashford," Duke Westwood spoke, then to Louisa added, "You may clear the tables now."

Swiftly, Louisa cleared the table and left the room to the kitchen with a polite farewell. Her fears were tumbling inside her mind, and she felt a little ashamed of how she had blurted out, without any class or dignity, how she could not afford to get dismissed.

Thankfully, His Grace had not let her go, and it seemed to her—she hoped—that he would not do so unless, as he had said, she did something egregious enough to warrant it. She took in a breath of relief and hoped that somehow, in the next few days and months, that she could do the same.

The garden was so peaceful near dusk, and its tranquility seeped into her chest and calmed the lingering worry Louisa held there. The faint sway of the trees and the warm vibrancy of the flowers around her was such a far cry from the scraggly flowed bushes in the orphanage's backyard that Louisa laughed.

"To think we thought *that* was a garden…" she snorted softly.

She tilted her head up to the dying sun and smiled at the warmth that splayed over her face. The soft perfume of the flowers in the air was heavenly, but she loved the tranquility around her most of all.

"It seems we meet again." Duke Westwood's voice jerked her out of her reverie.

Louisa nearly jolted out of her seat as if, somehow, she was doing something wrong or being somewhere she was not to be, but her fingers fastened onto the edge of the wooden seat, and she stayed still. Duke Westwood stood at the mouth of the garden, his tall frame haloed by the dying sun behind him. One of his hands was stuck into the pocket of his buff trousers, and again, he was in his shirtsleeves.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” she said. “I do hope that I am not intruding.”

“I think I am the one who should be saying that.” Duke Westwood strode closer. “You were here first.”

Knowing that his guests had left an hour ago, Louisa made to ask him why he had not joined them—but bit her tongue. She had no right to ask him anything of the sort and only smiled. “That is very gracious of you, Your Grace, but I think the garden has enough space for us both.”

He turned, and the sun turned the darkness of his light chestnut brown, “Do you know the story of this garden, Miss Stone?”

“Regrettably, Your Grace, I do not,” she said. “I do know that it is beautiful and utterly sublime.”

“It was my mother’s garden,” he said, his eyes flitting over the landscape. “After she did her duties, she was here, planting flowers and pruning bushes without fail. She dubbed it a sanction of serenity from the pressure of handling the Dukedom.”

Unsure of what to say, Louisa kept her answer short. “Her Grace had a good eye for color.”

“Yes, she had.” His tone dipped to regret—remorse?

Dipping her eyes to her feet, Louisa felt utterly inept. The more she interacted with the Duke, the more she realized that she knew so little about him or his house. The snippets she knew about him, how he was, that he was cold, and detached, began to come into sharper focus.

Is he truly cold all the time? What made him this way?

He plucked his timepiece out and peered at it. “I think it might be best for you to rejoin the kitchen staff, Miss. Stone. It is nearly supper time.”

“Oh, good heavens—” She stood. “Time slipped away from me. Thank you, Your Grace.”

Hurrying to the path that led to one of the servants’ entrances, Louisa paused to look over her shoulder; the Duke had taken her seat. But he still looked rigid, still, and solitary. An air of isolation around him brought a pitying twinge to her heart. His dark clothes would soon meld into the starry night sky, and he looked ... alone.

Tis as if he carries the weight of the world upon his broad shoulders.

While Louisa wanted to linger, her duties took her inside, and she hurried to the kitchen. She decided to ask more questions about the Duke and his family. His tone told her that his mother was dead, and it was a possibility that his father was too. That certainly would make one grow reticent.

“Miss Stone,” Cook Morna said. “Good timing. Will you take His Grace’s meal up?”

“I—” she hesitated. “I would wait until he rings, Miss Morna; he is outside at the moment.”

“Is he now?” The older woman’s lips ticked down sympathetically. “In his late mother’s garden, I presume. He has not been there in a while.”

The chance to ask about Duke Westwood’s family was ripe, and Louisa took it. “May I ask, what happened to his parents?”

Fixing her hat and apron, Cook Morna shook her head, “They passed away in their beds, Miss. Stone. Her Grace, god rest her soul, had His Grace, rather late in life. She was three-and-thirty, and her husband was in his late forties. His Grace had an awfully close connection with both, Miss Stone, and it cut him to the quick when they died.”

“Oh…” she whispered.

Cook Morna asked, “Did you ask for a particular reason?”

“No,” Louisa said, “It occurred to me that I came here but that I know little about this estate. I do not want to feel inadequate if I am asked about it.”

“Ah, Miss Stone,” Cook Morna sighed. “His parents passing is one of

the lesser hurts His Grace has endured."

There's more grief? What more happened to him?

She made to ask but knew it was not the right time, so Louisa hurried off to the servant's dining room to have her supper—but the questions still lingering with her, all the way to her time, she went to bed.

Is it that he is not distant…but lonely?

Want to read the rest of the story? Check out the book on Amazon!

Also, please turn the page to find a special gift from me!

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel "The Scent of Every Sin" (available only to my subscribers) for FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

https://dl.bookfunnel.com/64lyd083xo

